NF

ISSUE #62: WIDE OPEN SPACES

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THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

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KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

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THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS FROM ZERO

SODA DRINKER PRO

NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2022

GIVE THE GIFT OF NF!

THE HOLIDAY SEASON is upon us once more, and that means two things: Another full calendar year's worth of Nintendo Force Magazine issues is now in the books, and you might have some end-of-the-year gift shopping to do! Luckily, those two things go hand in hand with one another. Why not give the gift of a full year's worth of NF issues to one of your Nintendo-loving friends or family members?

It's become an annual tradition for us to offer Full-Year Bundles for sale in our website shop as the Black Friday shopping frenzy approaches near the end of November, so that's when you should check the site. We'll also send out a notice to all our active patrons when the new bundle goes on sale! Each issue will ship with its original double-sided wall poster included too, so you'd be giving the gift of a whole wall's worth of Nintendo artwork as well!

Thanks for all of your continued support, NF fans! We wouldn't be here without all of you! — **LUCAS**

Visit the website shop at
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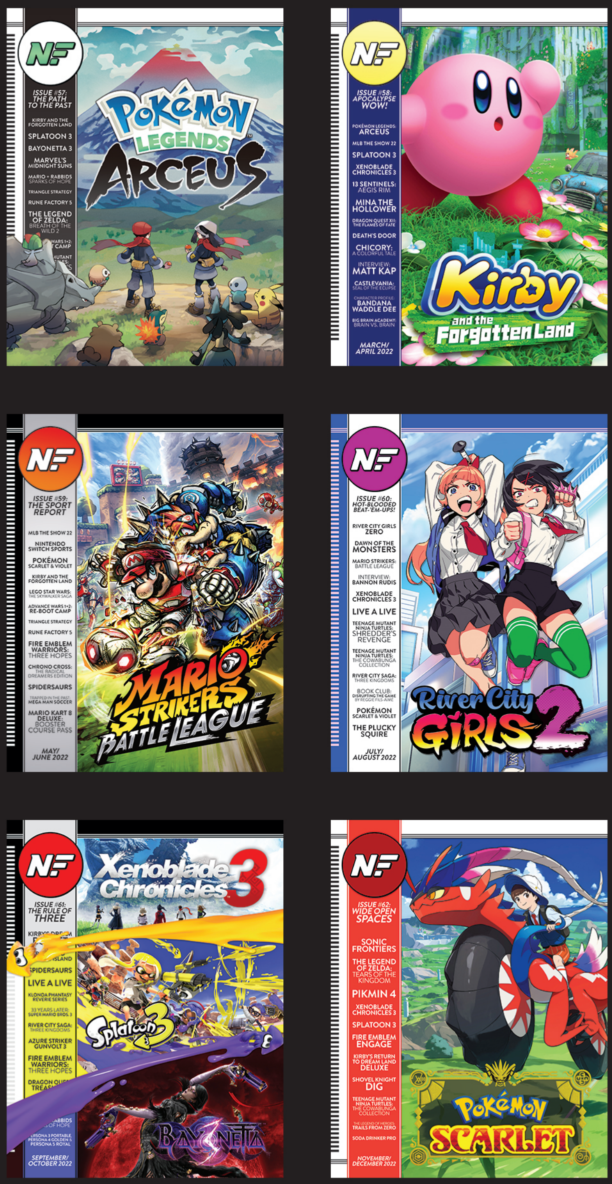

ALL 2022 ISSUES IN PRINT!

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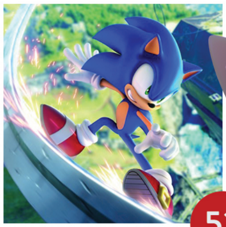

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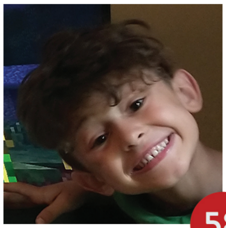

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ON THE COVER

For the fourth time since NF came into existence, Game Freak and The Pokémon Company are launching a new generation of their world-famous monster-catching RPG series. And just as we did on the prior three occasions, we're marking the moment with a double cover: one side for Pokémon Scarlet and the other for Pokémon Violet. (Though we didn't divide the entire issue down the middle this time.)

INBOX

THE EXHILARATION OF EXPLORATION

Airfare is expensive.

Train tickets. Cruise vacations. Even just the gas to refuel your own car can bankrupt you if you drive too far! Traveling in the real world isn't financially feasible for the vast majority of people around the planet.

Luckily, there's countless ways to explore all-new worlds for the low, low price of $59.99! Video games have offered escapes to new landscapes for decades now, and in recent years the open world genre of games has prioritized players' feelings of freedom and exploration above all other aspects of design.

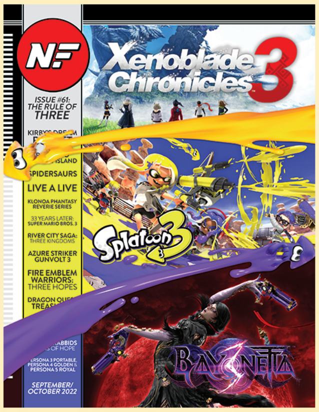
And you know what? It works! Sure, I'd love to have the time and the cash to be able to jet off to exotic lands on Earth whenever I wanted, but getting lost in an immersive world like Hyrule is so much more convenient.

For this edition of our fine publication, we're turning our attention to the rise of this category of go-anywhere gaming. Why now? Because the end of 2022 is about to be marked by two series taking a bigger leap into open world design than ever before! Sonic the Hedgehog will finally get to stretch his legs in the vast expanse of the Starfall Islands in the new Sonic Frontiers, and the Pokémon series is building on the open world momentum of Sword & Shield's Wild Area and the Hisui region from Legends: Arceus earlier this year with the fully free Paldea region in the new Pokémon Scarlet & Violet. Not to mention that Nintendo's biggest open world game, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, is getting closer to seeing its sequel, Tears of the Kingdom, finally arrive. With an even open-er world than before!

All that and more lie ahead for you in this NF issue! Happy exploring!

Lucas M Thomas

LUCAS M. THOMAS, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



ISSUE #61: **SEPTEMBER/ OCTOBER 2022**

A major thanks to everyone who said kind words about our last issue, and especially those who posted about it on social media! It seems like our focus on "3" games was appreciated, and the three-way split of the cover art was enjoyed! We're following up on the content of #61 here in #62, as we have our review of Splatoon 3 ready, as well as the review conclusion for Xenoblade Chronicles 3. (Bayonetta 3 is launching a little too late to make the cut for a review this time, but we'll complete the "3" trio in Issue #63!)

For the new Player's Poll questions, we turned our attention to Scarlet & Violet. First we asked which of the two versions you were leaning toward. Next we wanted to know your dream evolution or new variant for an old, existing Pokémon creature. Finally, we inquired about how you plan to approach adventuring in Paldea!

LETTERS

I picked Violet from the moment the titles dropped in the first reveal trailer. I'm partial to the color purple, myself, and I figured it'd be the least popular of the two versions. I swayed a bit toward Scarlet when they revealed Professor Sada and Koraidon, but then I saw Miraidon transform into a motorcycle and Koraidon . . . not. Yeah, still going with Violet unless Scarlet does something to really blow me away.
– AVERNALE

I am going to play Pokémon Violet, because I like the color violet more, and I think the legendary Pokémon looks cooler.

When I play a Pokémon game, I love to tackle the sidequests and explore a little bit. That's why I love open world games like Breath of the Wild. I'm probably going to look for the Herba Mystica first, but I want to get the most out of the game, so I'm going to use separate save slots and tackle all three challenges. **– LOGAN MOODY**

I've thought about the choice of Scarlet or Violet for a while, but I decided on Scarlet because Koraidon is cooler, in my opinion. It's like, natural, while Miraidon is more futuristic. After all, "mirai" means future in Japanese! So I would choose the more natural one: Koraidon. **– SMBOB**

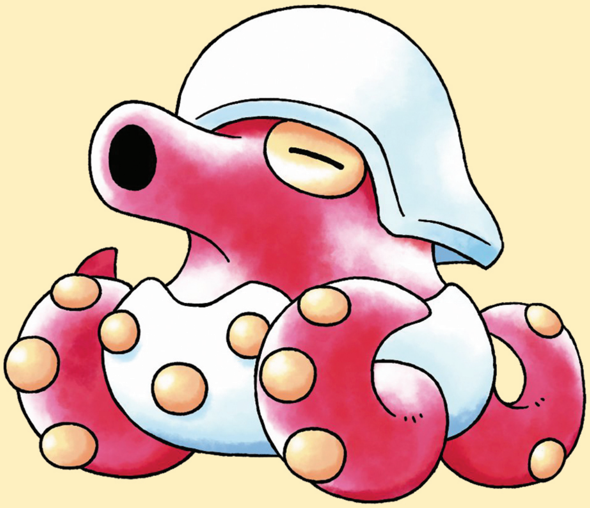
I'm gonna go with Scarlet because the theme is the past, and I think in the Pokémon world the past just seems more interesting (especially with myths and legends that get passed down).

I'd like to get a regional variation for Delibird. I've always had a soft spot for them.

I'd like to freely explore and then find my way at random. Like, I'll only challenge a Gym if I run into it. I don't wanna just look for them one by one.
– JULIO CABRERA

The Pokémon I really wanted to have a Paldean variant was originally gonna be Wooper, but I ended up seeing that they already have it as a Ground/Poison-type! So now I really want to have Torkoal get a regional variant. It would be a Grass/Water-type instead of Fire, and it would be all green with a geyser on its back and a whole miniature ecosystem of Flabébé living on its back too. And as for its evolution, it would become "Snorkoal" – becoming somewhat of a deserted island with a palm tree on its back with a little treasure chest half-buried in the sand.
– NATHAN ALLEN

It's the year 1998, and 13-year-old me is standing in Toys Я Us, having to choose between Pokémon Red or Pokémon Blue. That was most definitely the hardest decision I made that year! Fast-forward 24 years, and not much has changed! This decision has never been an easy one. Normally I'd immediately join anything Team Red/Fire. However, this time around, Violet is really pulling me in. Maybe it's the purple futuristic feel? Not sure. Honestly might have to just split my time and get the double pack. Both legendaries look amazing!
– A.J. PENTECOST



TIME TO UNLEASH THE ORIGINAL OCTILLERY!

I'm an old OG Pokémon fan. I was there for the very beginning! While I absolutely love the Gen I roster, I'd have to say Gen II is my favorite of all-time.

I love seeing some forgotten Gen II Pokémon like Girafarig get some love! A new evolution for Octillery could be neat. Maybe put him back in line with the old original artwork where he was based more on a tank! Or if they ever do a Scandinavia-themed Pokémon region, they could give Onix a Jormungandr-inspired evolution. **— JEREMY SCHEPPER**

I love the idea of using regional variants to tap back into scrapped design ideas from the past. And you named my favorite candidate for such treatment: The tank-like old design for Octillery deserves to be revived!

DEFINITELY Violet! Because who doesn't want to ride on a futuristic motorcycle-dragon-lizard-thing? Though obviously, this is probably gonna change as more game exclusives are shown. (lol)

Don't hate me for this, but: the Charizard line. Game Freak's favoritism toward Charizard is near-painfully obvious by now, but the repetitiveness of seeing the same orange dragon over and over and over again just wears you down. So, why not shake it up with a new regional variant or two? (One per game?)

I'm probably going to play it the way I play Breath of the Wild: go wherever the heck I want! Hopefully there's a map with pins, because keeping track of places in such a new game would be a chore!
— LUCA R.

When I play Pokémon I like to raise the stakes a bit with the Nuzlocke Challenge (look it up if you don't know), but with the new open world format will that challenge even work anymore? Besides that, when I play open world games I like to just cater to my whims and follow the shiny thing on the horizon. Getting distracted is fun! It makes it feel like there are endless things to do. That's probably how I'll play this game as well. **— DOMINICO N.**

I normally prefer past over future, but to be honest, I don't really care for prehistoric settings or concepts, and Miraidon's design is just the right amount of futuristic for me, so I have to go with Violet come November.

I could think about this for weeks, but I'll opt for what came to mind after just five minutes instead and say Girafarig should get an evolution. I'd love to see the little head on its tail have a calm look like other Psychic-types by default and then have a scarier look when it attacks. **— ANDREW P.**
Well Andrew, you're in luck! Girafarig is one of the old Pokémon that's confirmed to be getting a new evolution. (It may not look calm, though.)

The choice is tough for me too: So far nothing stands out between the two versions, I like both legendaries and they haven't announced any 'mon that's exclusive to one version or another that I *have* to have. Though I am leaning toward Violet because you ride the legendaries like a motocycle, and Miraidon comes closest to being a motorcycle by having actual wheels. Koraidon just has wheel-shaped growths, but still runs on its legs. Lame!

I haven't put much thought into it before, but I would make a new variant of Pikachu based on a dream I had when I was little: a more pink and fuzzy Pikachu with floppy ears that could flap like wings and allow this variant to fly. It would make this Pikachu variant an Electric/Flying-type.
— TEENKITSUNE

It's hard to choose a Pokémon to get a new form, but I have decided on the objectively best answer: Ditto! If Ditto gets a new form then every Pokémon will have one! Probably won't happen that way, but it's fun to imagine! **— ZACHARY H.**

I'm going to have to pick Scarlet . . . because I think the professor is cute. Otherwise, I don't feel particularly strongly about either one.

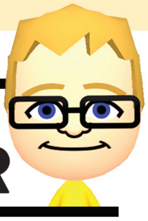
If I could pick any Pokémon to get a new form or regional variant, it would have to be Croagunk. It's just because it's my favorite! I think it's a cool martial artist and frogs (toads?) are adorable. It would be really nice to see it get some love again.

As for the open world, I tend to just follow the main story in those kinds of games anyway! I always find open world experiences to be overwhelming. However, if the map is particularly small, I might end up doing some of the side stuff. **— KYE BYLLESBY**

I'm far too busy getting to 100% in Xenoblade Chronicles 3: Depression Wars to form any opinion on Pokémon. Though I will say a Ferdinand take on Tauros would be cute. **— ZACHARY CZARNECKI**

BETA OCTILLERY ARTWORK BY **RACHEL BRIGGS (@RACIEBEEP)**

CARTER'S CORNER



Hello again!

My team for Mario + Rabbids Sparks of Hope is going to be Bowser, Rabbid Rosalina and, of course, Rabbid Peach. I'll probably try all the characters, though!

When I got tired of Kirby and the Forgotten Land back in May, I just played older games for three months. It was mostly Super Mario Maker 2 that I played, but I also found Giratina hiding in Pokémon Brilliant Diamond, too. Since I still had a while longer to wait for Mario + Rabbids, in September I started playing Super Mario 3D World again, aiming for 100% completion!

As of this writing I have four shiny file stars and access to World Crown! It takes a lot of work to reach 100% in Super Mario 3D World. You have to beat the game normally, of course, but then you have lots more work to do! You have to find all of the Stamps and all of the Green Stars and finish all of the levels with all of the characters. And there's more to do after that, too!

I might not finish it all before Sparks of Hope comes out. I'll be even busier next year with the Scarlet & Violet expansion DLC, but I then can probably finish the job in 3D World next year!

Quiz time! What will be one of my favorite new Pokémon in Scarlet & Violet? (I don't know the answer yet myself!) See you next time!

ABBY'S IMPRESSIONS OF SPLATOON 3

Hi there, Nintendo fans! I know you don't know me, but I'm Abby! I will be sharing my thoughts about the newest Splatoon game, Splatoon 3.

First up, it's amazing! The characters and animation are top-notch. My character is an Octoling named Magic. I'm trying to get the best gear combo that's all pink. I have also found my favorite basic weapons for different things. The Splattershot is great for Story Mode and Salmon Runs. The Splat Roller helps a lot in Turf Wars. Yeah, the Turf Wars are super fun but the Story Mode is just as good!

To get to the epic Story Mode you have to follow the old guy who is a Cuttlefish into the sewers. After that he will recruit you to be the new Agent 3! The levels can sometimes be tricky, but keep trying and you'll get the hang of it!

When you begin your Story Mode adventure, you're in "The Crater" – but that changes when you finish Level 5. (I won't spoil the next location for those who aren't that far yet.) Another thing about the Story Mode is that if you play it long enough, you can find out a secret about our three new announcers: Shiver, Frye and Big Man!

Let's move on to Salmon Run. I think it's a bit hard, because I'm a beginner and my teammates always get the Golden Eggs before me. There are also so many kinds of bosses that I could not even get through the whole "learning how to beat all the kinds of bosses" training session. I forgot to mention the maps change all the time, which keeps things interesting.

One of the gameplay modes is Tableturf, which is a cool card game in Splatoon 3. You can collect cards and make a deck, or stick with the regular Starter Deck.

Don't forget your friendly Little Buddy! You get to choose their hairstyle at the beginning! This Little Buddy is really important for the Story Mode.

I have told you a lot of my experience of Splatoon 3 right now. I need to ask you something: Octolings, or Inklings?

Anyway, I hope I join you in a Salmon Run or Turf War battle! Make sure to watch out for an Octoling named Magic, because that's me! Abby signing off. **– ABBY**

Thanks for sharing your Splatoon 3 thoughts, Abby. And thanks for helping me win that Turf War, Magic!

THE PLAYER'S POLL

Congratulations to **Luca R.**, the winner of our Pokémon Scarlet & Violet Player's Poll! Your new chance to win is below, and this time around we're interested to read your responses to three questions about the last decade of Nintendo gaming!

QUESTION #1

Turn back the clock by 10 years. What do you think is the best game Nintendo released in the past decade? On any system: Wii U, 3DS, Switch, etc.

QUESTION #2

On the other side of the coin, what do you think was Nintendo's biggest blunder of the last 10 years? (Did they make it right later?)

QUESTION #3

Finally, another New Year is upon us. What upcoming Nintendo Switch game due to debut in 2023 has got you the most excited, and why?

Send your responses to **PlayersPoll@NFMagazine.com** with the subject line "Player's Poll for Issue #63" – this time, one reader whose answers are picked for print will win the new 2023 Nintendo Switch game of their choice!

NINTENDO FORCE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Lucas M. Thomas
@NintendoForce

STAFF WRITERS
Evan Campbell
@evancampbell
Jonathan Holmes
@NonTrotski
Maggie Jones Lutey
@AvengerMags
Brett Martin
@NightramVGMM
David Oxford
@LBD_Nytetrayn
Nadia Oxford
@nadiaoxford
Tony Ponce
@megaStryke
Kris Randazzo
@GeekadeKris
Rebecca Rudranath
@strawbecky_81

STAFF ARTISTS
John-Charles Holmes
@Sonic9jct
Lindsey Layne King
@LuminousLungKey
Matthew Loffhagen
@kotorcomics
Matthew Taranto
@MatthewPTaranto
Thor Thorvaldson
@thormeister1971

CONTRIBUTORS
Carter Thomas

BY JOHN-CHARLES HOLMES

Another Colorful OLED

Play It Loud with the special Pokémon Scarlet & Violet Switch!

IF YOU MANAGED to avoid the temptation of buying the special edition Splatoon 3-themed Nintendo Switch OLED Model that we featured in this same spot in our last issue, well, here's your reward: yet another temptation to buy another special Switch!

This time around it's Pokémon Scarlet and Violet that have inspired a custom recoloring of the OLED base unit, the TV Dock it rests in and the two Joy-Cons that attach to its sides.

The Switch itself grabs the most visual attention with this set, as its backplate has been gloriously graffitied with a whole gaggle of graphics. The Paldea region starters of Quaxly, Sprigatito and Fuecoco make multiple appearances, as do Gogoat, Hattena and at least two spoons. That's due to picnics out in the vast reaches of the Paldean wilderness being part of the new adventure! You can see a picnic set over on the right side there.

The dock takes the OLED Model's standard white and layers the two box legendaries on top, with Koraidon colored in scarlet and Miraidon in violet. It's a snazzy look for the both of them!

That color pairing extends to the Joy-Cons too, but then goes a step further with the icons for the two different schools placed on front: The orange emblem of Naranja Academy is on the left 'Con, while the right one gets the grapes of Uva Academy. Which school you'll see will depend on which version you play! Naranja in Scarlet and Uva in Violet.

There's no accompanying Pro Controller joining this Switch set, but that's just as well, because Pokémon players don't need to have their wallets drained any further than they already will be this November! This special OLED Model will officially go on sale on November 4, two weeks before the Scarlet and Violet games do on November 18. **— LUCAS**

> "There's a prominent Team Star logo on the back of the Switch too. Maybe the whole graffiti style was inspired by that team of miscreant students? Or the new graffiti Pokémon, Grafaiai? – **LUCAS**"

I want to try and help make games around the world a little more fun.

"Mr. Sakurai's YouTube channel has only been online for a few weeks as of this writing, but his subscriber count has already soared to nearly 1,000,000! (If you add together the two totals from the English version of the channel and the Japanese version too.) Hopefully his incredibly fast success in this space will inspire other famous game developers to get more vocal about their own processes and best practices in the future!"
– LUCAS

Learn from Professor Sakurai!

Excellent lessons in fundamental game design concepts are now yours to see for free.

MASAHIRO SAKURAI is the world's most popular new YouTuber!

With work finally completed on Super Smash Bros. Ultimate and its expansive DLC as of roughly a year ago, series director Masahiro Sakurai has been in an in-between phase. He surely will step up to helm another big game – whether that's another Smash or something else entirely – but with that next project not yet announced, he's officially still on hiatus at the moment. But that doesn't mean he hasn't been busy!

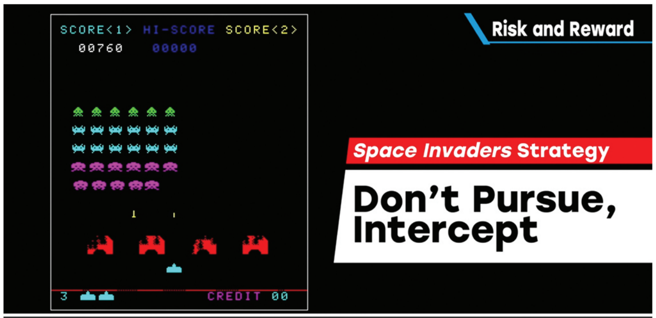
On August 23, he surprised the Nintendo fandom (and the video game industry as a whole) by debuting a brand-new YouTube channel called "Masahiro Sakurai on Creating Games." He's now a content creator!

(I've never liked that term being used as a way to describe someone who makes videos on YouTube – it seems so bland. Like calling a chef a "food preparer." Especially when the "content" is so rich and varied!)

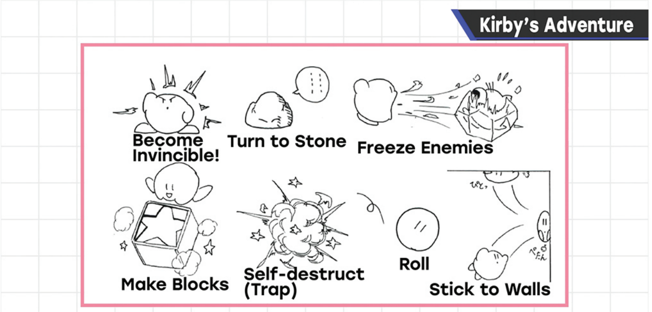
Mr. Sakurai's content is rich indeed, as he offers up his decades of game development insight in bite-sized portions, separatedly neatly into several different categories. For example, he's got "Animation," "UI" and "Effects" categories all set apart to discuss those individual aspects of making a game's graphics. He's got "Work Ethic" videos that discuss topics related to living the life of a video game developer and navigating the business of the industry. He presents "Design Specifics" to call attention to key game design components like the moment when a really heavy hit lands against an opponent in Smash Bros., emphasizing how critical it is to really sell such moments with sufficient timing and effects to indicate their impact. Every bit of it is fascinating!

These topics and insights would be interesting coming from anyone, but having Mr. Sakurai sitting on the couch in his own home and talking to the camera, with the weight of his own experience and game design history behind him, makes these videos truly must-see experiences. That history really comes out, too, in his "Game Concepts" videos, in which he offers never-before-seen development notes about the games he's directed in the past, like Kirby's Dream Land and Kirby's Adventure! We get gems like the screengrab seen below, which is some previously unseen concept art from the time when he and his team were working to add Kirby's famous Copy Ability to his arsenal. (It wasn't in the first Kirby game! It was only added in his second!)

Your list of YouTube subscriptions might already stretch toward infinity, but you won't go wrong adding one more to your regular mix. Mr. Sakurai is respectful of your time, too, as each video's full length is usually just a few minutes! He knows that "presentations are all about speed," so he makes his points quickly, supports them, then lets you get back to your day. I guess that means I should stop yapping and wrap this article up too! **– LUCAS**



In other words, the best strategy is to intercept invaders, not pursue them.



Here are a few pages from the design document I wrote.

Spider Samus

Her Metroid Dread Figma is magnetic!

GOOD SMILE HAS outdone themselves with their amazing Metroid Dread Samus Figma! Right off the bat, we need to discuss the fact that this Figma comes with Spider Magnets in order to have Samus appear to stick on walls. The metallic paint really makes this figure look slick, and Samus even features both soft and hard plastics and double joints to facilitate more dynamic and versatile posing. Priced at $85, this Figma comes with the standard figure stand, but will also have a Morph Ball accessory, an Omega Cannon and several hand pieces, You'll have to wait a while, since it won't debut until October 2023. But pre-orders are open!

A New Rideable Kart!

Jakks has powered up the old model from a few years ago.

JAKKS PACIFIC'S FIRST rideable Mario Kart vehicle from 2014 was a success, but it was a little out-of-date even then, since it was modeled after Mario Kart 7's standard kart. Jakks is back this year with an updated model featuring the standard kart from the newer Mario Kart 8! (Though MK8 is itself nearly nine years old now!) This one goes twice as fast as the 12-volt previous model thanks to its new 24-volt battery. It also comes with the Mario Kart 8 theme and sound effects built in, and advertises large rear wheels . . . that can supposedly perform drifts? It's designed for kids 3 and up with an adjustable seat – so if you'd like to see your pre-schooler drifting in your driveway throwing banana peels, just rev your wallet up to $400 and head to Target! Shipping is free even though it's over 100 pounds, so you can work that into the price. Sadly, it can only support up to 80 pounds, so no karting dreams for me. It may be the most affordable electric vehicle on the market, but it doesn't include the glider add-on, since you'd likely need a Toad mechanic to install that.

BY BRETT MARTIN

You Got Rush Pet

This brand-new dog costume totally rocks, man!

BACK IN THE day, HalloweenCostumes.com sent me and my sons some costumes from their site. One of those was an official Mega Man costume that still gets worn because of my 5-year-old! Needless to say that after being through two boys and now a third, the costume holds up and was built well.

The same company has now created the best way to complete that original Mega Man costume, and that is by buying their new Rush costume for dogs! So, first you have to own a pup, and then you need to buy these costumes, and then you can have amazing adventures flying around your neighborhood, or going underwater, or even reaching crazy high places. Imagine giving your canine a full robotic upgrade!

checks notes

OK, so it seems this costume doesn't actually include jet, coil or submarine accessories, or turn your dog into a robot. But just imagine how much more loyal your pet would be with this getup on! It has his little red helmet and a jacket with all of the robotic joints and details that make Rush . . . Rush. (The photo they chose doesn't really show the stubby tail, but it's gotta be there.)

It was released October 12, so they cut it real close for this year's Halloween, but I'm sure some puppers got to enjoy some robotic dog fun. And for only $35, how could anyone resist? If your canine companion missed out this year, then you could always pick it up and squirrel it away for next October's candy-seeking celebration. (But who are we kidding? Rush costumes are good to use year-round!)

SUPERSIZED SPHEAL!

Pokémon's latest mega plush is ready to roll out!

JOINING THE LIKES of Lucario, Slowpoke, Arcanine and Mareep is this life-sized Spheal plush. Exclusive to The Pokémon Center, Spheal will sell at $450. This is around $100 more than the Japanese version and is likely explained by having to ship the 16-pound plush from the manufacturer in Vietnam.

Spheal is 31.5 inches tall and 39.5 inches long, which doesn't sound very spherical until you factor in its other features, like its tail. The plush also sports a cooling effect to the touch, which falls in line with this 'mon being an Ice-type (but it really has more to do with the smooth fabric they're using to simulate plushy blubber). The description actually says it's something delightful to come home to after a long day! While it's currently sold out at the Pokémon Center Japan store, the U.S. store is still taking orders.

A life-sized Altaria plush just sprang up at the Japanese Pokémon Center as well, so we may be seeing that plush appear in the States soon too. I really feel for those collecting this massive set! Considering price and space, the cost of the love of gigantic Pokémon items really sets you back!

amiibo UPDATE

DID YOU PICK up your Steve and Alex amiibos? The two Minecraft heroes recently hit store shelves and both are being gobbled up – even though there are a plethora of figures and other merchandise for the pair.

The new amiibo that everyone is anticipating is the set of three new Splatoon 3 figures. Normally the amiibo for a game release on the same day as the game, but this set of three is lagging quite a bit behind! November 11 is the current release date, so let's hope there are no last-minute delays. It's already been quite a while to wait for them since launch, so I wonder if there was some miscommunication or production delay.

The new set has a yellow Inkling girl, a blue Octoling boy and a Smallfry with Power Eggs. The amiibo will allow players access to exclusive gear when scanned. Outfits can also be saved to the amiibo for easy and quick wardrobe changes. Other in-game functionality may be revealed later on, but this is what we know now!

Along with this new set, the Pearl & Marina set and the Callie & Marie set have been re-released. Some of these amiibos were reaching some high prices on auction sites, so it's nice to see them available regularly again. It would be nice if they did reprints for more older figures!

First Look at the New Mario Movie!

"The Super Mario Bros. Movie" is set to open in theaters on April 7, 2023.

IF AT FIRST your film doesn't succeed . . . wait 30 years and then try again?

Nintendo's flagship franchise, Super Mario Bros., was infamously adapted into a live-action movie back in 1993. Though that film has diehard fans to this day, Nintendo was so disappointed at its flawed adaptation of the Mario world that the company fled from Hollywood and didn't attempt to make any more movies for decades afterward! It was only when work began on the Super Nintendo World theme park in partnership with Universal Studios that new filmmaking bonds began to be built.

Shigeru Miyamoto connected with Illumination Entertainment's Chris Meledandri (known for this work on the Despicable Me films), and he felt that Chris and his team could be the ones to finally get Mario right on the silver screen. This new Mario movie was then announced to be in the works nearly five years ago, and we've been waiting to catch a glimpse of it ever since!

Well, feast your eyes. A first trailer has been released, and in it we get to see Illumination's versions of Mario, Bowser, Toad and more – along with hearing a bit of their new voices.

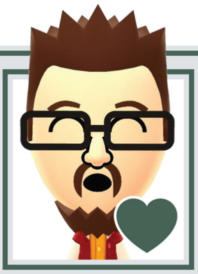
Bowser (voiced by Jack Black) is the star of the teaser, as he leads a huge army of Koopa troops in an attack on a penguin city. The penguins seem to be inspired by the ones first seen in Super Mario 64 – but these are no babies crying for mama! They stand up to the Koopa King with icy might and firm resolve. (Though that doesn't go so well for them.)

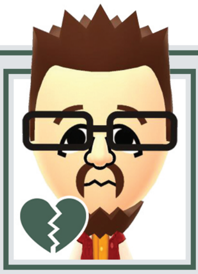
It seems like the story might establish Bowser as an invader going from kingdom to kingdom to conquer and destroy, and the penguins' ice land is wrecked to show how strong our big bad villain is. Audiences need to be properly fearful of that same fate befalling the peaceful Mushroom Kingdom, of course!

The only hero who can protect the fungus-y folks: Mario! (As voiced by Chris Pratt.) A ton of the online discussion about the film has focused on whether or not Pratt's performance is suitable for the iconic role of Mario, or whether Nintendo should have stuck with Charles Martinet, who has been Mario's voice in the games since the '90s. But it's a little early to tell yet!

You'll be able to see (and hear) the whole thing when The Super Mario Bros. Movie opens April 7! **— LUCAS**

Great!
I have high hopes that this movie is going to be good!





Oh.
We still have to wait until April to see it.

FORECAST

A meteorological look at the biggest game and DLC releases currently scheduled to debut in the next few months.

HALLOWEEN IS HAPPENING shortly after this issue will be finalized, and may have already come and gone by the time print copies land in subscribers' mailboxes. But even if the costumes and candy are already in the rearview as you're reading this, you can keep the spirit of the spooky season alive by playing Bayonetta 3, available on Switch as of October 28. We're already working on our review, so look for it next time!

THE HURRYING HEDGEHOG is running around once again – this time speeding into an all-new open-world setting! Sonic Frontiers is scheduled to be unleashed on November 8, and with it comes the promise of more freedom and exploration than any past Sonic game has ever seen. We've got a final pre-release preview prepared, so run to Page 52!

IF YOU'D INSTEAD prefer almost the exact opposite experience to Sonic's constant running around at high speed, consider the slow-paced strategic reasoning of Tactics Ogre: Reborn! It's due to drop on November 11, and it promises hours upon hours of turn-based battles that you'll only be able to overcome with carefully considered preparations and troop movements. Learn more on Page 44!

THE COVER STARS of this issue are of course the two titles that together represent the Pokémon series' latest mainline sequel: Pokémon Scarlet and Pokémon Violet, both set to officially be available beginning on November 18. We've got an extra-long preview prepared for them, so ride your preferred motorcycle monster over to Page 37!

NOVEMBER'S PRETTY SET with at least two big new worlds to explore in the Sonic and Pokémon series, but don't forget that Dragon Quest is getting back into the act soon too! The all-new adventure Dragon Quest Treasures will have you traveling through vast tracks of territory on a quest for, well, treasure! It's due to debut on December 9. We previously previewed this one last time, and we'll hopefully have a review next time!

FINALLY, I SAID I'd keep this position locked down for Advance Wars 1+2: Re-Boot Camp until it somehow struggles its way back onto the official release schedule, so here it is again! This game was originally set for a December arrival last year, so it's possible Nintendo will let it roll onto store shelves exactly one year late. No word yet, though!

> My exploration-loving heart is thrilled at this lineup heading toward the end of the year, as I know that my sons and I will have a blast seeing all the sights of Pokémon's new Paldea region courtesy of Scarlet & Violet, and if we're able to find the time we might also be able to embark on wide, roaming adventures in the latest Sonic and Dragon Quest titles too. The boys have never played games in either of those series before, but I think they'd love them! – **LUCAS**

HAVING EXHAUSTED THE original list of promised Nintendo 64 titles for the Nintendo Switch Online + Expansion Pack service, the Big N recently confirmed a whole second wave of first-party games that are planned to be added through the end of this year and well into 2023. New games on the horizon include the first three Mario Party titles (be careful with the stick-spinning games in the first one!), 1080° Snowboarding (a personal favorite), Excitebike 64 and both Pokémon Stadium and Pokémon Stadium 2.

But I want to give a special shout-out to the one I've personally been wanting to replay ever since N64 NSO began: Pilotwings 64! It boasts the first real freedom of exploration experience of Nintendo's 3D era, with open-world maps larger than the contained spaces of Super Mario 64, including a whole recreation of the United States of America that you can soar across at your leisure! Definitely give it a look if you're an NSO subscriber.

And if you're not? Nintendo's last addition announcement might push you to become one: The classic multiplayer masterpiece of the N64 era, Rare's GoldenEye 007, is also going to be added to the service soon. That's enough to get me feeling both shaken and stirred!

The Only Way to Visit Lake Lapcat

If you want to experience the open world in Bowser's Fury, you have to buy Super Mario 3D World too.

SO, WHY ISN'T Bowser's Fury in the eShop?

I mean, I know that it really *is* in the eShop — but only attached to Super Mario 3D World, being sold as a two-game bundle for $59.99. My question is why is Bowser's Fury not also being sold separately?

We're turning a lot of our attention toward open world games in this NF issue, and as part of that discussion I felt like I needed to remind all of our readers that a truly excellent open world was created just for Mario just last year: Lake Lapcat, the setting of Bowser's Fury. It's a watery world dotted by islands, each one holding several platforming challenges for our favorite plumber to complete.

Oh, and it also occasionally gets attacked by a frightening, humongous, angry Bowser covered in black ooze.

The freedom of exploration and player choice Nintendo crafted for this "extra" game was so perfect and on-point that many critics thought that Bowser's Fury as a whole could be giving us a glimpse of the future of the greater Mario series. Myself included!

So . . . why doesn't Nintendo want more people to play it?

I get placing it in the two-game bundle to begin with. Nintendo was probably concerned that returning players from the Wii U era wouldn't want to double-dip with a second purchase of Super Mario 3D World without some significant new content added to it. Or else they figured it needed a boost in appeal for those who skipped it the first time around, ignoring its Wii U debut. (I feel like Super Mario 3D World is a spectacular game all on its own and wouldn't have needed the help to score significant sales, but I'm just trying to see from the point of view of a Nintendo marketing executive.) So I understand using it as an extra at first.

But why hasn't it been split off by now? I have to imagine that there's an audience of potential players out there who don't want to plunk down the full $59.99 price just to play Bowser's Fury, but who *would* take a second look and consider buying it if it were on sale in the eShop alone for some lesser amount. $30? $20?

An open world Mario adventure in the eShop for $19.99 would shoot up the sales charts in no time! It's wild to me that it hasn't happened already.

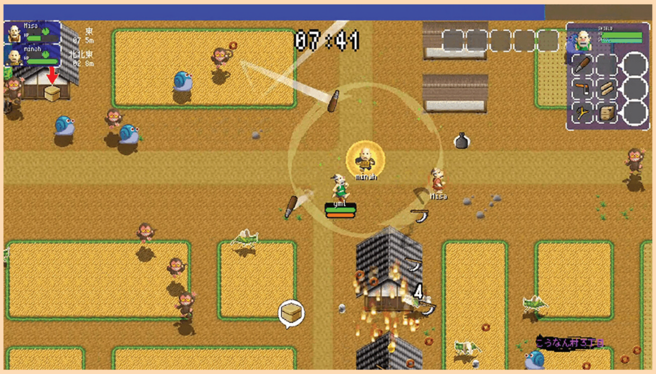
My brain gets boggled even further when I remember just how much of a standalone experience Bowser's Fury is. Yes, it's got a lot of emphasis on the Cat Mario power-up, which was the big new addition to Mario's costume closet that debuted in Super Mario 3D World. But the feline theme is really the only point of connection the two titles have with each other: Bowser's Fury isn't a DLC expansion of 3D World in the vein of the Master Trials or Champions' Ballad DLC for The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. It's not content that needs you to own a different base game in order for it to run properly. It is its own base game!

The only real reason I can think of is that, even after 16 years of Nintendo operating different digital storefronts in connection with their consoles and handheld systems, the company still sees digital-only, downloadable games as "less than." Like it would be a mark against Mario's stellar reputation for one of his new adventures to be made available for download without also being on store shelves in physical form.

And the price! That $59.99 is like a badge of honor. The old Nintendo Seal of Quality was retired long ago, but the company just replaced it with their practice of putting their games on store shelves at full MSRP and hardly ever letting them sell for less. Maybe there's too much pride and value in the Mario name for Bowser's Fury to be offered up alone for a discounted rate.

(Meanwhile Kirby continues his kingship in the eShop space, since HAL obviously feels differently about how they present their star.)

In the end, this isn't an issue that I'm truly upset about. It just puzzles me, is all. It makes me raise a quizzical eyebrow and wonder just what secret sales strategy Nintendo is adhering to when they decide which content goes physical, which hits the eShop, which gets bundled together with something else and which gets to fly solo. Maybe we'll figure it out someday! **— LUCAS**



Sunsoft is Back!

The sun is rising on another comeback attempt from Sunsoft.

SEVERAL NES-ERA PUBLISHERS like Capcom, Konami and Tecmo are still very much alive today, but some of the other top-tier names of old, like Sunsoft, never managed to achieve the same staying power. Next year, though, Sunsoft's aiming to make their most serious bid yet at bringing their brand back to mainstream relevance.

A newly reinvigorated Sunsoft unveiled their very own "Direct"-style presentation recently – hosted by a strange digital VTuber persona named Sunsoft-Nosuke – in which they announced their plans for a proper comeback. The last time they attempted something like this, the gaming landscape looked very different. The full-on retro/indie boom hadn't fully taken root back in 2010, so when Sunsoft unceremoniously dropped Blaster Master Overdrive exclusively on WiiWare, and a couple of other lesser-known retro classics on the Virtual Console, things fizzled out fairly quickly. This time, though, retro-inspired indie games are everywhere, and interest in genuine hidden gems on classic consoles is at an all-time high.

So what does Sunsoft have in store? First up is Ikki Unite, a property that most people outside of Japan are probably not very familiar with. The original Ikki was a Japanese arcade action game that pitted farmers against a feudal overlord. This new Steam-bound version will feature roguelike elements and online play.

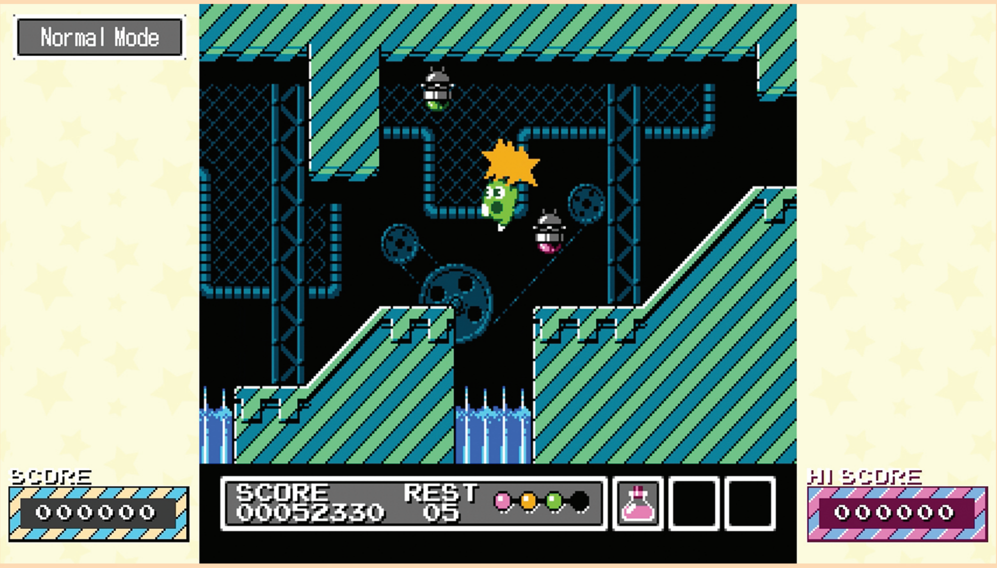
Next up is Gimmick!, an extremely impressive-looking (and sounding) NES game that was never released outside of Japan and Scandinavia. Gimmick! is a platform action game starring a little green monster who was accidentally purchased as a toy for a child's birthday party. The gameplay revolves around throwing bouncing stars for both offense and traversal, and the game features some truly impressive graphics and music and challenging gameplay. Gimmick! Special Edition looks to add modern features like rewind, achievements, new modes and more. It's coming to Switch and other modern platforms early next year both as an eShop title and a physical release, and the game's soundtrack is being sold on vinyl and cassette this November.

Finally, they announced one more retro re-release, though this one has a bit more of a history in the West. Ufouria: The Saga was actually one of the headliners the last time Sunsoft tried to reinvent itself. Released for the first time in the U.S. on the Wii Virtual Console in 2010, Ufouria was riddled with some strange issues right out of the gate. Primarily, since the game had never been properly released in the States, Sunsoft decided to drop the European ROM onto the North American Virtual Console service, which resulted in the game's music sounding distressingly off key. It was later put on both the 3DS and Wii U Virtual Console services, though they never actually corrected the music issue. Now, a brand-new edition of Ufouria is coming to Nintendo Switch, similar to the way Gimmick! is being handled, so players outside of Japan will finally be able to play the game the way it was meant to be played.

As for what kind of game it is, Ufouria is a rather colorful search action type of game where you unlock various bizarre characters with different abilities to explore a giant interconnected world. It's actually part of a whole series of Japan-only games called Hebereke, which features a slightly different cast of characters. One of its follow-up releases, Sugoi Hebereke, is currently available as part of the Japanese Super Famicom Nintendo Switch Online service.

This game's soundtrack is also getting a vinyl and cassette release, though thanks to the brevity of its tracklist, it's being paired with the music of another classic NES Sunsoft game, Journey to Silius.

Will Sunsoft succeed this time in returning to the public eye? Time will tell! **– KRIS**



Countdown to Shutdown #4

The old eShops are closing, yes, but at least we had advance notice!

THE DISCOURSE SURROUNDING the upcoming shuttering of both the 3DS and Wii U eShops has been understandably negative, as of course Nintendo's fans don't want to lose access to the many different games available through those digital storefronts. In an ideal world, the shops would remain active forever! We'd be able to log on and buy games from them 10, 20 or 30 years further into the future!

Well, the reality is less than ideal. But recent events elsewhere in the industry have offered me some needed perspective that we could've had it a whole lot worse!

Google launched a cloud gaming service called Stadia less than three years ago, at the end of 2019. It never managed to make a huge impact, but it did have some traction and several developers worked to get their games into Google's new ecosystem. In fact, several devs were still hard at work on new Stadia releases when, on September 29, Google announced out of nowhere that they were pulling the plug on the whole service! New purchases were suspended, refunds were rolled out for anyone who'd ever bought anything Stadia-related and developers – some of whom had new games ready to launch, with release dates set mere days later – had the rug pulled out from under them with no warning whatsoever. It's a total mess.

So I'm now more appreciative of Nintendo's approach. The long, slow wind-down of the eShops has happened with a ton of notice in advance, and I'm thankful about that! **– LUCAS**

SAKURA SAMURAI: ART OF THE SWORD

A LOT OF the games in this feature can't be loyally ported to Switch's single-screen setup – but that's not a problem with this cherry blossom-laden outlier! Like its spiritual predecessors Nintendoji (a Japanese DSiWare exclusive) and The Mysterious Murasame Castle (originally a Famicom game, now also stuck on 3DS eShop), there's no reason why Sakura Samurai couldn't come to modern consoles. But 10 years after its release, there's no sign it's ever going to. And that stinks! The way it blends 3D exploration and Punch-Out!!-style combat makes it really special. With a fantastic (but small) array of giant armored bosses, ninjas, fencers and the occasional yokai thrown in for good measure, fans of Japanese culture are sure to be charmed. This piece of Big N history will soon be petals in the wind, so snatch it while it's still in hand! **– JONATHAN**

FEBRUARY 2012

HARMOKNIGHT

GAME FREAK CONTINUES to be known almost entirely for their work with developing the mainline Pokémon games, but around a decade ago they tried to break free of that one-note reputation with this note-bashing adventure! HarmoKnight is a hybrid between a platformer and a rhythm game, as the musical hero Tempo runs, jumps and attacks to the beat. If you like endless runner games like Bit.Trip Runner or the keep-the-beat gameplay of Nintendo's Rhythm Heaven series, you'll have a blast getting into the groove here!

What's more, HarmoKnight now enjoys some additional notoriety a decade after its launch, as its director James Turner has now moved on from Game Freak to start his own studio called All Possible Futures. Their debut game, The Plucky Squire, looks absolutely incredible! It's due to release next year, so why not prepare for it by turning back the clock to check out this piece of James' résumé? Its beats can't be beat! **– LUCAS**

MARCH 2013

DS VIRTUAL CONSOLE

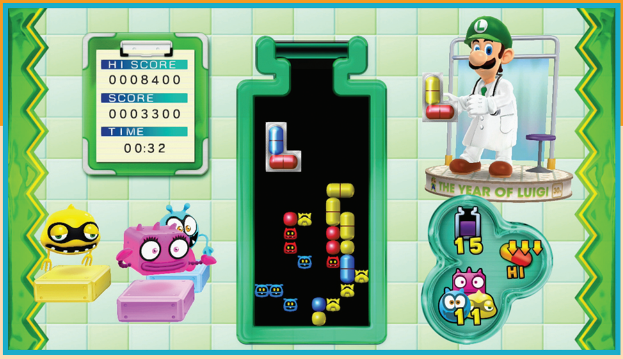
THIS ISN'T THE only way to get these games, but if you want to play them on your TV, the Wii U eShop is the one way to go!

And a lot of the 31 DS titles that were ported to Virtual Console on Wii U cost a ton on the physical resale market, so even if playing on the big screen isn't a priority for you, this could still be your most cost-effective route to get 'em.

Taking on the DS' unique dual-screen experience and bringing it to the home console world is no small feat! It all works wonderfully too, allowing titles that aren't likely to be ported again – like Star Fox Command, Mario Hoops 3-on-3, The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass and its sequel Spirit Tracks – to play exactly as their original designers intended. And with multiple display options!

There's also some eye-opening stuff here that time has largely forgotten. For instance, did you know that Wario is playable in both Super Mario 64 DS and (sort of) in Yoshi's Island DS? And Wario: Master of Disguise is here too! Get all this weird Wario DS fun on Wii U while you still can! **– JONATHAN**

2015 THROUGH 2017



DR. LUIGI

WHAT WAS THE first video game you imagined?

When I was a kid, one of my favorite NES games was the original Dr. Mario. My Dad and I played that cartridge to death, and to this day we still have regular head-to-head multiplayer matches to see who can bust viruses faster. But I wasn't satisfied with just zapping the blue, red and yellow virus enemies in Mario's big bottle – I thought there should be green viruses too. I figured that could be the big new gameplay addition made in my imaginary sequel, Dr. Luigi!

Fast-forward a few decades, and sure enough a real sequel named Dr. Luigi was released as a Wii U eShop download. It didn't add green viruses, so it's not a total match to my childhood design document, but it did debut a new, more difficult color-matching mode that pairs two colored capsules together in an "L" shape. I wasn't the hugest fan of that when this game first went on sale, but I've gained greater appreciation for it over the last nine years. And Switch doesn't have its own unique Dr. Mario sequel yet, so why not grab this one? **– LUCAS**

DECEMBER 2013

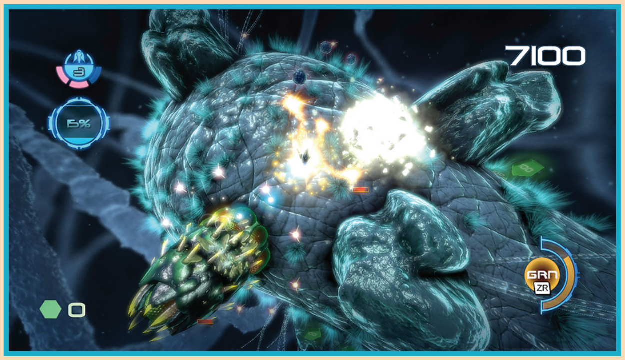
ETRIAN ODYSSEY GAMES

FEW SERIES HAVE been as adept at taking advantage of the dual-screen format of the Nintendo DS and 3DS systems as Atlus' seminal role-playing series Etrian Odyssey. Equal parts first-person RPG and cartographer's dream, the Etrian Odyssey series tasks you with creating a team of worthy explorers to both brave the labyrinths of the World Tree Yggdrasil as well as map out the dungeons while you explore them.

You will most definitely need to record your surroundings, as each of the dungeons features not only standard baddies but terrifyingly overpowered miniboss-type creatures called FOEs that can easily decimate you unless you plan ahead. You'll need to plot out alternate routes on the bottom screen's map to avoid certain doom until you're hardy enough to defeat them.

Five different installments were released for the 3DS, so there's plenty of mapmaking and monster-slaying to be had for years to come. **– THOR**

2013 THROUGH 2019



NANO ASSAULT NEO

THIS NF ISSUE just so happens to be lining up precisely with this game's 10-year anniversary! That's because this issue also lines up with the 10-year anniversary of the Wii U hardware itself, and this was one of its eShop's Day 1 launch titles.

Early adopters of the Wii U who got their system hooked up and went online immediately to browse the latest digital wares were blown away by the visuals on display in Nano Assault Neo. Its development team at Shin'en Multimedia has long held a reputation for being able to craft breathtakingly brilliant graphics for their games, and the spectacle of this twin-stick shooter still holds up to this day!

Funnily enough, like Dr. Luigi up there, the goal of this game is to eliminate viruses. Only the approach is a little different: piloting an armed-to-the-teeth spaceship that's been shrunken down to microscopic size and sent inside of a human body! It's the latest in medical technology! **– LUCAS**

NOVEMBER 2012

The Blue Burrower is Back!

SHOVEL KNIGHT DIG

WITH HIS SIGNATURE shovel-shaped sword and infamous horned helmet, Shovel Knight has become one of gaming's biggest icons. But where do icons get their power? Why do they mean something to us? The reasons boil down to what they represent, and how. With the five (!) games in the original Shovel Knight: Treasure Trove compilation of titles, the Blue Burrower worked as an emblem for the underdog. He was the little guy who was willing to use the most unlikely of weapons to bounce on the heads of giants in pursuit of higher ground and invite us to dig for treasure in the most unexpected of places.

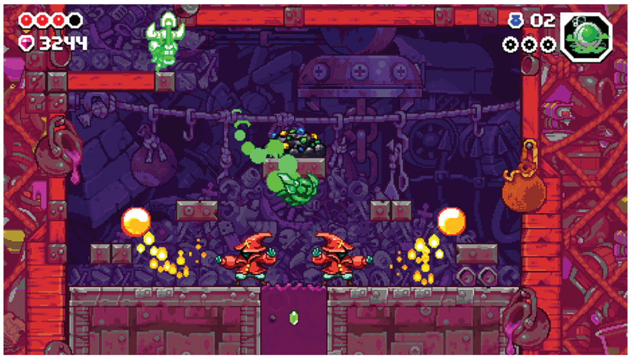
That image began to change after Shovel Knight became a massive success. An overwhelmingly large list of cameos in other games, including the illustrious Smash Bros. Ultimate, also worked to transform his public persona. This one-time underdog was now seen as one of the alphas of the indie community! That's where Shovel Knight was when the two latest games in his franchise, Shovel Knight: Pocket Dungeon in 2021, and now Shovel Knight Dig in 2022, were first released. With Pocket Dungeon, the reception was mixed. It's a great game, but it may have suffered from "Mega Man Soccer syndrome." By taking on a new genre (puzzlers) while staying true to many of the things that made franchise special, it may have alienated existing fans of that new genre while struggling to bring series loyalists along for the ride.

Shovel Knight Dig takes more of the Mega Man X approach. Just like the original Shovel Knight, it's a 2D action title about pogoing on the heads of enemies, getting past obstacles, collecting new weapons and abilities, then taking on other knights. The big Dig difference comes from all the ways it upgrades and alters the formula. While Shovel Knight looked largely like an 8-bit title from the late 1980s, Dig could have been a high-end 2D title on the Sega Saturn or PlayStation 1. The graphics are, in a word, stunning. Seeing characters you know and love from Shovel Knight's inaugural low-fi adventures spring to life with previously unseen levels of fluidity and fidelity is nothing short of breathtaking. Dig is by far one of the best looking 2D games of 2022!

But Mega Man X did more than just bring that franchise to greater levels of graphical excellence – it also gave a new focus on vertical movement across the environment. Dig does the same, but instead of kicking up walls like X once did, Shovel Knight is seen for the first time actually tunneling down through the Earth in a way that truly lives up to his namesake. You still move left and right, bouncing on enemies as you fall through the air in each level, but you also need to strategically dig through rock and soil to get to the bottom of each stage at steady pace. If not, a giant saw will come from above and chew you up like you were nothing but a light blue candy-coated chocolate ball!

That saw speaks to Dig's biggest departure from the Treasure Trove. The first Shovel Knight games had level designs that never changed, while Dig's stages are partially randomized. Every time you play, different chunks of design will be laid out before you in new ways. That also goes for the arrangement of basic enemies (a mix of familiar goons like Goldarmors and all-new foes like puff balls that make you small) and Dig's unique group of bosses (an

SWITCH PUBLISHER: YACHT CLUB GAMES DEVELOPERS: YACHT CLUB GAMES & NITROME RATING: E10+

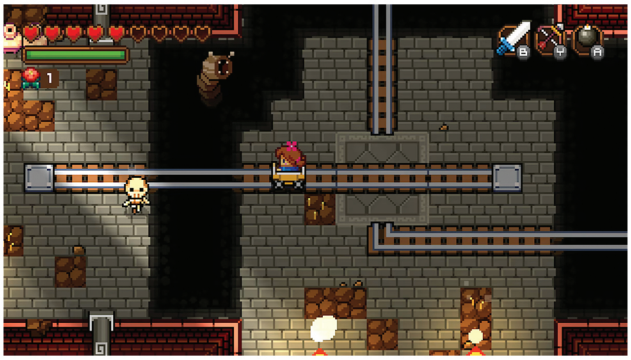


outfit called the Hexcavators that holds two Treasure Trove veterans and four all-new knights). For instance, I've counted at least five different layouts for the arena where you battle Spore Knight (the Mega Man X4-esque first boss of the game), and out of the countless runs I've done overall, I've only encountered a giant bubble-blowing dragon three times. Other variables come from the three golden gears to collect in each stage (which give you food or a random ability), forks in the road that allow limited choice on what stage to take on next, multiple secret armors to collect, loads of side stuff to discover in the peaceful camp above and tons more.

There's also a secret level and a giant, enchanted boss fight that tie Dig directly to Treasure Trove. The only way to see them is to pull off a series of cryptic feats that challenge you to get through each of the game's seven stages in one long survivalist run. (In a normal run, you'll do four at most before the credits roll.) The goal with all these options is to keep players feeling surprised even after they've dropped into the same area hundreds of times before.

This is the one area where Shovel Knight Dig's armor has a few cracks. Like Downwell and Spelunky, two of the best roguelikes ever made, Dig has a huge variety of ingeniously conceived level possibilities. The problem is, Dig wavers in its commitment to show you those challenges. Maybe in an effort to appeal to fans of the traditional Shovel Knight structure, you can unlock a limited level select ability early on. After beating a boss, a little in-game currency is all it takes to skip them and their stages on future runs. Likewise, the number of permanent items and upgrades you can buy might tip the scales a little too heavily in the player's favor. Of course, all these advantages are optional, but it's likely that some won't know that they've made the game too easy for themselves with their purchases until it's already too late. There's also no reward for abstaining from them.

Still, with unprecedented levels of depth and danger to unfurl, Dig does a great job at providing fans of the franchise with a near-endless take on the iconic Shovel Knight experience. It could use a new ending or two, but I believe the devs are already working to make that happen via free updates. In the meantime, it's safe to recommend Shovel Knight Dig to all 2D action-adventure fans. The dialed-up art and bottomless pit of treasures are a perfect metaphor for Shovel Knight's "indie upstart to enduring superstar" career path. **– JONATHAN**



Grandpa, Tell Us Another Story!

BLOSSOM TALES II: THE MINOTAUR PRINCE

YES, BLOSSOM TALES is heavily inspired by classic Zelda games, but it's also got more than enough of its own personality to set it apart. It's derivative, but in the best way possible.

The main creative hook is in the way its story is being told. You play as a girl named Lily, but what you're playing isn't an adventure that's happening to her directly. Instead, Lily and her brother Chrys are children being told a story by their grandfather. It takes place in the Blossom Kingdom – a medieval fantasy land that bears more than a few similarities to Hyrule – but Lily and Chrys appear in the story exactly as they do in the real world. One of Lily's idle animations, for example, sees her take out her phone and poke around. The item you get to help you swim is a pair of magic floaties. The final boss battle incorporates modern movie references! These anachronisms are never overused, but when they come up, it's always a treat.

This pretense runs through the entire game in fun and creative ways. At several points during the adventure, the two children will start arguing over what happens next in the story. One kid will think you should be attacked by monsters, and the other will think you should be attacked by pirates. One kid will think the game's magical instrument should be a guitar, while the other thinks it should be an accordion. These decisions change what's happening in real time, sometimes in hilarious fashion as the monsters keep changing back and forth while the kids argue over what they should be. (You get to choose what wins.) Your decisions don't ultimately have an enormous effect on the way the game plays out, but it's a great way to keep things feeling fun and fresh while adventuring.

Perhaps the bit about the storytelling that I appreciate the most is the way it handles saving. When you quit the game, you pick back up in whatever screen you left off in. What's more, each new play session starts with your Grandpa giving you a brief recap of what you've been doing and what you're supposed to do next. It's not only charming, but extremely helpful.

It's more than just clever writing and a fun gimmick, though. Like any good Zelda game, Blossom Tales II is full of clever puzzles. Each dungeon tends to feature one particular kind of puzzle that repeats and gets a little more complex each time. By the end, some of these puzzles are on par with the very best even Zelda has to offer, and are extremely rewarding to solve.

Unlike in some Zelda games though, items never lose their usefulness. Every item you get stays relevant throughout the entire adventure, sometimes needing to be reused in fun new ways late into the game.

This is all to say that Blossom Tales II is absolutely brilliant. There's a ton of secrets to find, some great post-game content, and it's clearly been made with an abundance of love and care. The first game was great, and this one is even better. Blossom Tales II is not to be missed!
– KRIS

9.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: PLAYTONIC FRIENDS DEVELOPER: CASTLE PIXEL RATING: E

2 Fast 2 Furious

REDOUT 2

REDOUT 2 IS a game that gets in its own way at nearly every turn with difficulty woes and baffling design decisions.

While I loved that the intro to the game essentially has you dive right in, it would have been nice to know what I was doing, since the controls are more complicated than most racers out there. My next natural stop was the tutorial, but that's where I met my first questionable design choice: You must unlock further tutorials by completing the current one. That would be fine . . . if the game did a better job of citing specifically what players should do at certain intervals.

The game introduces a concept only once and then expects you to have it mastered for the rest of the tutorial track. You must end up with enough points to advance by the end of the race or you have to play again. Grasping concepts like strafing with the right stick during a turn can get frustrating with so little explanation and no further info even after failing. Not an auspicious start.

Another design choice that had me confused was making the track intro cutscenes unskippable. They plague each venue: The game has concocted an elaborate and unnecessary history of each zone, explaining why and how the track was built. That might be neat in a game featuring characters or exploration, but it's very out of place in a racing game. If I'm being forced to sit through it, I would have at least appreciated a runthrough of the course and things to look out for while racing at unimaginable speeds.

Redout 2 does do speed well, and that's really what the game is about. In the vein of Wipeout and F-Zero, this game focuses on making the speed happen on brilliant tracks in interesting scenarios. There are so many ways to keep you challenged with all of the gravity-defying twists and vomit-inducing turns that it does get addictive. Cairo, Tokyo and the Mariana Trench are examples of terrestrial tracks, while later races are set on the moon and beyond.

The real thing keeping me from playing is the difficulty, which starts high in the tutorial. I don't mind difficulty, as long as it has a ramp up to that difficulty. I was pretty frustrated with the tutorial levels, as players cannot change the difficulty until they complete the tutorial. This gave me vibes from the original Driver on PlayStation, where players were locked out of the game until they completed the tutorial. It amazes me that a design blunder from the '90s could be repeated today! While players of the original Redout should know what they're getting into, this game rivals even that challenge.

There is a ton of content to sift through once you get into the main game. Career is where players collect stars by racing to advance to new tiers. This is the meat of the game, but Arcade is for jump-in play: Take any ship out on any track for practice or just to experience the amazing visuals and music.

While the visuals are stunning at high speeds, cracks in the visage begin to appear at lower speeds or during cutscenes – especially when playing on the Switch screen in Handheld Mode. Online multiplayer was not tested because I could not find anyone to play with during my attempts. While I understand that a splitscreen would be a tough sell with these visuals, it was a bummer not being able to test my skills against my sons with any kind of local multiplayer.

Folks that are attracted to these superfast future racers will likely love Redout 2 and generally forgive its curious design choices, but most gamers will want to steer clear of this one. **– BRETT**

6.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SABER INT.
DEVELOPER: 34BIGTHINGS
RATING: E10+

Creature Collection & Cultivation

OOBLETS

OOBLETS IS A tremendously well-made Frankenstein's Monster of a game, mixing together some of Nintendo's most popular titles with a bold, cheeky art style. That said, while the game is clearly a labor of love and very carefully made, it's most definitely not for everyone.

Video gaming has a long and celebrated history of developers shamelessly stealing ideas from one another. In keeping with this legacy, Ooblets wears its influences proudly upon its sleeve: Part Pokémon, part Stardew Valley, with a healthy dollop of Animal Crossing thrown in for good measure, a game of this type could very easily feel like a derivative and shallow copycat.

Where Ooblets stands out, though, is in its presentation. Overflowing with a unique charm and personality, and utterly adorable to boot, the art style and creature design alone is enough to set Ooblets apart from a growing number of Poké-likes, farming sims and cute animal titles that clutter the Nintendo eShop.

This isn't a mere case of style over substance, though. Hidden behind this incredibly cutesy facade is a game that clearly has had a lot of tinkering and careful balancing under the hood. Making any one game that lives up to its Nintendo inspirations would be a challenge, but Ooblets goes further, mashing together three game genres in a way that feels like more than just the sum of its parts. Every disparate game mechanic flows smoothly into the next. *Of course* helping out your island's mayor involves taking part in nonviolent monster dance battles. *Of course* these dance-offs reward you with seeds for your farm. Before long you stop seeing the transitions where Pokémon ends and Stardew Valley begins.

All of this said, the oddball presentation won't necessarily work for everyone. Silly, irreverent and cloyingly twee, while Ooblets is very well made, I personally found it a bit grating. Perhaps I'm too jaded and grumpy, but the game is *so* cutesy and adorable that I found it rubbed me the wrong way.

I recognized, though, that while I personally didn't love the game's sense of humor, this was purely a matter of personal taste. So, I handed the controller to my 7-year-old daughter to get her input. Her verdict: This is the best game ever! Good enough to tear her away from Splatoon 3, and that's saying something!

This second perspective matters a lot. The very things that I find tiresome about the game are the elements that my daughter absolutely adores. While I roll my eyes every time the game calls a watering pail a "dribblycan," my daughter eats it up and cackles uncontrollably.

This, then, is Ooblets: a tremendously well-made game that mashes together disparate wholesome game genres to create something unique and clever, with a tremendously memorable art style and sense of humor. That said, the game is not for everyone. Chances are you can tell just by looking at screenshots whether it will speak to you or not, but regardless, it's hard to deny that Ooblets is exceptionally good at doing exactly what it set out to do.
– MATTHEW L.

8.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: GLUMBERLAND RATING: E

A Rather Rare Rockman Release

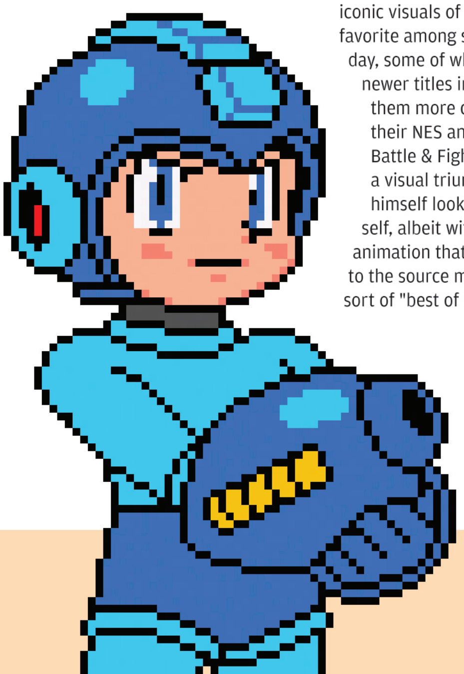
MEGA MAN BATTLE & FIGHTERS

THIS IS AN interesting case of the right game being released at the wrong time. As recently as the end of May, Mega Man Battle & Fighters would have earned a solid recommendation, no questions or reservations – but, things tend to change. And things did change, leading us to the situation we're in right now.

Mega Man Battle & Fighters is a Neo Geo Pocket Color port of both Mega Man: The Power Battle and Mega Man 2: The Power Fighters, two boss rush-styled arcade titles that only saw limited launches in localized form around the turn of the century. They're among the rarer releases within the Mega Man canon, last appearing as unlockable parts of Mega Man Anniversary Collection, all the way back in 2004 during the GameCube generation. (And don't even get me started on the issues with *that* particular release.)

Even though this release is mostly in untranslated Japanese, it's easy enough to fumble your way through Mega Man Battle & Fighters – and for whatever else may flummox you, there's an English version of the original instruction manual to help you along the rest of the way. Unique to this release is also a character database with entries you can unlock by playing the game, replacing the arcade versions' multiplayer.

The graphics and sound are a step down from their arcade inspiration, but not necessarily in a bad way. Mega Man was born in 8-bit, and the iconic visuals of that era remain a favorite among some fans to this day, some of whom even "demake" newer titles in order to make them more closely resemble their NES ancestors. In this way, Battle & Fighters is something of a visual triumph, with Mega Man himself looking much like his old self, albeit with new frames of animation that stick more closely to the source material, offering a sort of "best of both worlds" look.



Musically, the soundtrack isn't as robust, with some tunes repeating themselves frequently. And of course, the Neo Geo Pocket Color wasn't likely to rival Capcom's CPS line of arcade boards in quality there, either. It's weaker fare, but not bad by any means.

In fact, the whole package is very solid. As Neo Geo Pocket Color games go, it looks good, it sounds good, it plays well and everything pretty much works as intended. So why, then, is it so hard to unreservedly recommend this purchase?

It's simple, really. At the start of June, Capcom revealed they would be releasing Capcom Arcade 2nd Stadium across all major platforms, including the Switch. The base program is free (and even comes with a free game), and if you don't go for the complete package, individual titles are four bucks a pop. Meaning that you can get both of the arcade original Mega Man fighters in all their glory, plus a free game, for the same price you'd be paying to get this release! (Technically cheaper, actually, by a penny).

That makes Battle & Fighters a very conditional sort of recommendation. If you have to choose, go with the 2nd Stadium releases. But if you are a huge fan of Mega Man, of demakes or of Neo Geo Pocket Color games, this is a good addition to any Mega Man collection. **– DAVID**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SNK DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RATING: E10+

Half Frog, Half Gun, All Fun?

FROGUN

EVERY ONCE IN a while, a new game concept comes along that just brings such a smile to my face that I can't help but love it at first sight. Frogun is one of these rarities, as its whimsy begins with its punny name, then extends into its nostalgic presentation. You've just got to grin when you take it all in!

Frogun sums itself up in its six-letter name: This is a game about what happens when you mash up a frog with a gun. Rather than firing bullets, this little green weapon now flicks out a frog's long, sticky tongue every time you touch the trigger — and the game worlds are built all around that simple idea.

One function of the Frogun is its power to attach to objects and small enemies and pull them in so our young hero, Renata, can grab them. Another power propels her through the air, assisting in platforming: latching the Frogun's tongue to a wall will pull her directly toward it.

Renata can also jump normally, and working in tandem with the tongue's grappling hook action, you quickly find yourself hopping and zipping around the environment . . . when the control scheme plays nice, that is. Achieving a consistently accurate aim with the Frogun's tongue is a challenge, as there's a persistent feeling of clunkiness that always makes things feel just a bit off. You'll want to target a block or wall with the tongue, but it will instead fire off too far left or too far right, and you'll miss your mark. A more precise aiming mechanic is included, but it's slow, so it's not too helpful when you're trying to move quickly — like when the platform you're trying to reach is moving and you only have a few seconds to get to it.

Frogun would probably prove to be frustrating to most who attempt it, but older gamers who lived through the era its visuals seek to emulate would probably have more patience with it. This game looks like it was pulled straight out of the early 3D gaming era of the PlayStation 1 or the Nintendo 64, and those of us who played the platformers of that generation surely remember the kind of clunkiness they included. Frogun pays homage to that, too.

Also lowering the overall enjoyment here are inconveniently placed unskippable dialogue scenes. There's an NPC named Jake who challenges Renata to races, and they're so tough that you're bound to fail multiple times before you find away to beat him to the finish line safely. But when you fail, and restart, you have to listen to his whole opening speech over and over again! That's no fun.

So while I love this game's style, the character of Renata and her faithful frog/gun the Frogun itself, the reality of actually playing the game sadly doesn't inspire quite as much of a smile as I got when I first saw this adventure revealed. But feel free to give it a shot! **— LUCAS**

7.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER: TOP HAT STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: MOLEGATO
RATING: E

8.0

Rise and Shine

MONSTER HUNTER RISE: SUNBREAK

NO DOUBT MY Long Sword had grown dull in its scabbard – over a year had passed before I tried picking up the weapon again in Monster Hunter Rise: Sunbreak, a beefy expansion to a wonderful game.

And man, it's tough to re-enter the arena after such a long break! Capcom doesn't quite make things easy either. There's no tutorial or recap to assist with getting back up to speed in Sunbreak. Plus the expansion picks up after the final storyline quest from Rise proper. So expect to clear out the cobwebs – unless you haven't given up the hunt after all this time! (I even forgot Elder Fugen called my character "Squirt.")

Once re-acquainted, Sunbreak whisks players away to a new hub named Elgado. The port feels better configured than Kamura Village. All of your main NPCs are much more confined, making loops to chat quicker. And it's here where Admiral Galleus and company witnessed a mysterious crater that's causing monsters to appear.

The big trio of these new beasts are called the Three Lords. There's Garangolm, a cross between a gorilla and an armored tank; my favorite, Lunagaron, an icy werewolf; and the crimson Malzeno, a vampiric dragon surrounded by the odd Qurio. All three provide thrilling encounters and help propel forward the fun new narrative.

In fact, Sunbreak's plot grabbed me more than the main game's. It's probably thanks to a strong cast of standout characters. For starters, early on you meet Fiorayne, a brave knight and sister of the trader Rondine. She's cool, collected and capable. Then, there's the quirky scientist Bahari. He zones into his research work so much that it puts him in harm's way. It's a unique and memorable group.

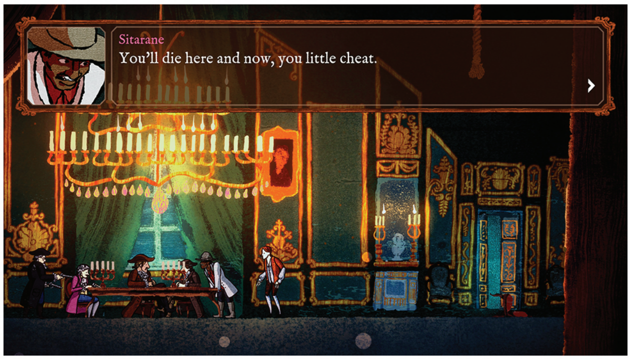
What further elevates them is the addition of Follower Collab Quests. These missions see your hunter teaming up with the likes of Fiorayne or even Hinoa and Minota from Kamura. The characters possess distinctive strengths on hunts, offering varied complementary support. For instance, I loved bringing Dame Luchika on my expeditions – her ranged attacks worked well with my slicing and dicing. Capcom needs to seriously consider making this aspect a permanent addition to the series going forward!

One area that seems a bit lacking with Sunbreak is . . . well, the areas. The new locales are a bit underwhelming. The Jungle offers a pretty cliché tropical climate, which doesn't stand out. The Citadel is far better – though it once again provides another forested region, there's also a ruined castle along with a frozen part of the map. It's neat to see the variety within the locale.

Finally, to spice up the endgame, Sunbreak introduces Anomaly Research Quests. These missions see hunters going after monsters affected by the aforementioned Qurio. As such, the gigantic beasts are more powerful and deadly. The armadillo-like Volvidon, for example, is a cakewalk in the main game. But when afflicted, the creature puts up quite the stinky fight! And of course there are specific rewards to these special quests, which in turn lead to unique upgrades to your wardrobe.

All in all, Sunbreak's endgame has more depth, and obviously there's more challenge here too. It brings about creative new creatures to fight and creative new characters to fight alongside. You just may have a hard time convincing your friends to clear their cobwebs to return and fight alongside you too! **– EVAN**

DLC PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: CAPCOM RATING: T



Shuffling and Swindling

CARD SHARK

FOR THOSE WHO are tired of run-of-the-mill card games – even those with a story – here's a title that's more about the setup than the payoff. Nerial and Devolver Digital's Card Shark is all about the art of the swindle, using all sorts of real-world techniques and tricks to manipulate gullible opponents, wrapped up in a historical fiction rags-to-riches story.

In the French countryside, during the Age of Enlightenment, Eugene, a mute young servant, suddenly finds himself on the run from the law. He's taken in by the Comte de Saint-Germain, who trains him as his card-playing protégé as the two of them become Robin Hoods, fleecing the rich and giving their spoils to the poor. Starting with the classic Three Card Monte, Eugene moves on to learning how to stack the deck in his favor, creative card shuffling, hand gestures, card marking and all sorts of other illicit techniques.

There are risks involved, and Eugene and the Comte could very well end up arrested – or worse. And when worse happens, Eugene will find himself in the Land of the Dead! I know it sounds morbid, but this was my favorite part, because he can either bargain for his life, or *literally* cheat Death, showing off all his card-manipulating skills. However, that comes with a real risk: If you gamble with Eugene's soul and you lose, *you also lose your save file.*

Many of your marks are anachronistic, like Sitarane, who's based on a real criminal from the French colony of Réunion from the late 1800s, or American con artist Soapy Smith, who fleeced prospectors during the days of gold rushes. There's a lot of names you'll immediately recognize – like Voltaire and Casanova – as well as other interesting historical figures, such as the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, the son of a French landowner and an enslaved African who was a composer and an expert fencer.

Speaking of music, a lot of it is adapted from period pieces and played with period instruments, and it really brings the world of pre-revolutionary France to life. I also liked the art style, which reminded me a lot of Hergé's Tintin comics.

A lot of the duo's cons involve a lot of moving parts, like quick-time events and specific controller directions, and sometimes they're hard to tell apart. I don't recommend using the joystick on the Joy-Con to play, especially if it's prone to drift. One good thing about the difficulty level selection is that you can enable a difficulty option to toggle hints when pressing R, as well as an easy mode that lets you auto-advance through story levels without having to depend on movements or timing. However, tutorials can't be quit unless you get everything right, which can be annoying if you just want to move on.

I did have a few times when the game would softlock when an asset wouldn't load correctly. Luckily, autosave is always in effect and going back to the game's start menu fixed things right up without losing much progress – but it was annoying to see it happen so often.

Card Shark is an interesting concept with an imaginative story, great visuals and great music, but it was a little on the short side, and the cons with a lot of moving parts got repetitive. If Aviary Attorney whetted your appetite for games set in historic France, follow it up with this one! **– REBECCA**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DEVELOPER: NERIAL
RATING: E10+

Putt Your Way Out of Purgatory

CURSED TO GOLF

CURSED TO GOLF manages to perfectly capture the spirit of the real sport of golf, in that it's often more frustrating than it is fun.

Speaking of spirits, that's who you'll be playing as! The story in this one stars a promising young golfer who seems to be in the prime of life . . . when they're suddenly struck by lightning in the middle of a round. Death delivers them not to the pearly gates or the flames of eternal torment, though, but rather a middle ground between the two: a golfing-themed purgatory. There, our hero has a chance to ascend back to the world of the living – if they can clear a full round of 18 holes in a row!

It's much easier said than done, as the holes of this afterlife course are riddled with traps and cramped spaces – and you only have a limited number of strokes to reach the flag in each one before you're kicked back to the clubhouse and have to start from scratch. What's worse: holes are randomly generated!

Yes, Cursed to Golf is a golfing roguelike. Funnily enough, that makes it quite thematically similar to Hades, which also challenged players to rise up out of the depths of the underworld to reach the surface! I'd recommend you play that game before this one, though, because I've been annoyed at trying to make progress here.

Shots demand precision in Cursed to Golf, but the game isn't set up well enough to let you achieve that precision with consistency. The camera is a big part of the problem: You can move it around to scope out the lay of the land before beginning a swing, but once you commit, the view gets locked on your golfer and you can't see very far ahead any more. It's like golfing half-blind.

The game tries to help you out by giving you a lot of extra powers, like cards you can play to influence the trajectory or speed of a shot once it's in flight – but those are finicky to use correctly. And they're also a limited resource, so I always feel like I shouldn't use them, in case I need them later to deal with an even trickier situation. It's the old problem of finishing a Final Fantasy game with an inventory full of 999 potions because you never felt comfortable using them. Maybe the powers could have just been permanent?

Hades never frustrated me like this game has, because even when I lost and got sent back to the start in that one, I still felt like I was making progress overall. Here, when I lose, I just feel like turning the game off and never coming back to it again.

I've got to give credit to the incredible sprite art and wonderful animation of the characters, but don't let their cutesy appearance fool you: Cursed to Golf is a truly punishing experience that isn't well suited for kids who might otherwise be drawn in by its style. Hit these links only if you're a dedicated golfer who's ready to tap into the fullest extent of your patience. **– LUCAS**

6.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: THUNDERFUL
DEVELOPER: CHUHAI LABS
RATING: E

BearBNB

BEAR & BREAKFAST

ORIGINALLY ANNOUNCED IN the August 2020 Indie Direct, Bear & Breakfast is a cozy simulation game complete with places to explore, mysteries to solve and friends (and cold, hard cash!) to be made along the way. Unfortunately, despite the storyline and a cast of memorable characters, it's not quite the laid-back hotel sim experience that I was hoping it would be.

Hank, a big ol' lovable bear, lives with his mom Margaret and his two best friends, Anni the energetic dog and Will the grumpy bird. One day, while running an errand for Mom, they encounter the Pawn Voyage travel company, along with its mascot Fin – an inflatable shark with a two-way radio – who has a lucrative "business" opportunity for the trio: redeveloping the rundown buildings of the forest into a resort community! With some animal and a few human friends, Hank rebuilds abandoned structures into cozy lodgings, complete with amenities like bars, lounges and even arcades and museums – all while unraveling the story of what happened to the forest in the past.

Every one of the characters has personality and charm, from the kindly human woman Barbara who understands Hank's unique bear noises, to Took, a raccoon who trades litter for furniture and décor. Even Mom is happy to help you out if you need some pocket money!

Each map gradually eases you into building new room types, and materials and other resources spawn regularly and are plentiful. While Hank's inventory is pretty spacious (where does he keep it?) I have one issue with the crafting system: If you attempt to make something when your inventory is full, the item goes into a "lost and found" accessible from the main menu. It's a good idea, but I would have preferred an "inventory is full" pop-up message with the option to cancel or continue.

The developers delayed the Switch port for a few weeks from its PC release date to hammer out the Switch-specific U.I. and controls, and while they're good, they could be a lot better. Navigating from menu to menu can be confusing, especially when going into the cooking menu to prepare meals (done by selecting function cards and placing ingredients on them, which can get really confusing) or switching between building and inventory modes while constructing resort rooms. Having menu highlights in different, brighter colors, icons indicating vacant hotel rooms instead of barely readable text, or hearing audio cues when moving between menus, would go a long way. One update I would *love* to see from them: touchscreen support, which would have made things a lot easier when I was playing in Handheld Mode.

As of this writing, there's been one patch, but it still hasn't fixed one of the major issues I encountered: the game crashing to the Switch menu when traveling between maps. Also, at one point, I got Hank stuck on a piece of the background scenery. I was about to give up the save I had worked 12 hours on and start over again until I found an option in the pause menu to force a reload of the current map that drops Hank into a new position. It was useful, but the addition of that option raises interesting questions.

Bear & Breakfast has its share of issues, but it's filled with great characters, wonderful visuals and pretty sweet music. Hopefully it's a little more stable by the time this issue goes to print, and the devs implement some more U.I. improvements. My 3-star review: It's OK, but would be better with some extra polish.
– REBECCA

SWITCH PUBLISHER: ARMOR GAMES
DEVELOPER: GUMMY CAT
RATING: E10+

7.0

Gilbert Guides Guybrush Again

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

SIMULTANEOUSLY PERFECT FOR newcomers yet tailor-made for old fans, strikingly beautiful yet borderline hideous, and emotionally impactful yet somewhat insultingly shallow, Return to Monkey Island is a complicated game. In some ways it makes perfect sense, while in others it revels in the fact that it makes no sense at all. One thing is for sure though: I'm glad it exists.

Monkey Island is a classic series of comedic point-and-click adventure games. You play as a guy named Guybrush, an aspiring pirate who travels the seas looking for treasure and love, and who frequently faces off against his nemesis, the ghost pirate LeChuck. This is the sixth game in the series, so it's got a bit of a history, but don't worry: There's an excellent recap available to you right off the bat that catches you up on all the major plot points. That said, there's a lot of stuff in here that most people won't really get if they haven't played at least the first two games: The Secret of Monkey Island and Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge. In fact, this game starts by attempting to make sense of the arguably nonsensical ending of Monkey Island 2, which has been puzzling fans since 1991.

The gameplay has been tremendously refined since the glory days of LucasArts adventure games. Terrible Toybox has done a magnificent job of lowering the bar of entry with little sacrifice, including specialized recaps between play sessions and a built-in hint system that only outright gives you an answer if you explicitly ask it to. Puzzles are still challenging, but thankfully not so illogical that you're forced to try every item with every interactable object. The new U.I. does a fantastic job of letting you know what you can and can't do. It's all quite brilliant, and makes for a much more fun experience than its predecessors.

The voice acting is top-notch, the procedural music is sublime and the writing is as good as it's ever been . . . but the game's divisive art direction has to be mentioned. As much as I wanted to, I never did get used to the way this sequel looks. The backgrounds are gorgeous, full stop. Non-human characters like the ghosts look fantastic. It's the humans, particularly Guybrush himself, that I personally found grotesque. I can't say it's objectively bad because that's not how art works, but I really didn't like it.

Then there's the ending. I don't want to spoil anything here, but if you were unhappy with the way Monkey Island 2 ended, chances are you might be pretty miffed here too. It's honestly quite sweet and well explained by a post-credits note from the creators, but it ultimately left me feeling kind of sour on the entire experience, which is never what you want.

Still, overall I really did enjoy my time with Return to Monkey Island. It has multiple endings, difficulty settings, ghost chickens, and a metric ton of stuff to discover. My personal gripes aside, it was clearly made with a lot of care, and is probably the best-playing game in the series. Fan or not, I recommend giving it a go. **— KRIS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: DEVOLVER DIGITAL
DEVELOPERS: TERRIBLE TOYBOX & LUCASFILM GAMES
RATING: E10+

7.5

Extreme Eating

KIRBY'S DREAM BUFFET

KIRBY'S BEEN AROUND for over 30 years now, but after three solid decades of gorging himself in almost every game he's ever been in, the little guy somehow still hasn't had his fill. So now he's kicking his eating up a notch!

Kirby's Dream Buffet is an all-new eShop-exclusive feeding frenzy for our eternally hungry hero. The story setup finds him just about to chow down on a beautiful mouth-watering cake when he's suddenly shrunken down to the size of a shrimp. But that just means normal-sized food now appears to be gigantic, so his ravenousness is only amplified even further!

The gameplay makes eating huge quantities of food into a contest between multiple copies of Kirby. It's a game that can be played solo, with the computer taking command of the rival eaters, but it's mainly meant to be a multiplayer meal.

Races are the meat and potatoes here, as your Kirby rolls himself through an obstacle course of giant foodstuffs on his way to a massive mountain made of strawberries. A smattering of other strawberries is scattered across the course along the way, too, and victory is ultimately determined by which Kirby eats the most by the end. So it's a balancing act: Do you make a beeline straight for the finish line in order to secure the biggest bonus there (the 50-strawberry mountain), or do you choose a more meandering path through the course in order to pick up more strawberries as you go?

Rolling along is mostly what you do, with somewhat squirrelly control that gets progressively more difficult the more you eat: Kirby's body gets bigger and his top speed slows down when you hit regular intervals of total strawberries eaten. That's the game working to keep things competitive for players who might be lagging behind – no one player can ever get too terribly far ahead. But then there are ways to subvert that, too, like using the new Jelly ability: It allows a leading player to slip right through crumbling cookie barriers that would otherwise force them to stop and wait a while for the lagging-behind racers to catch up a bit.

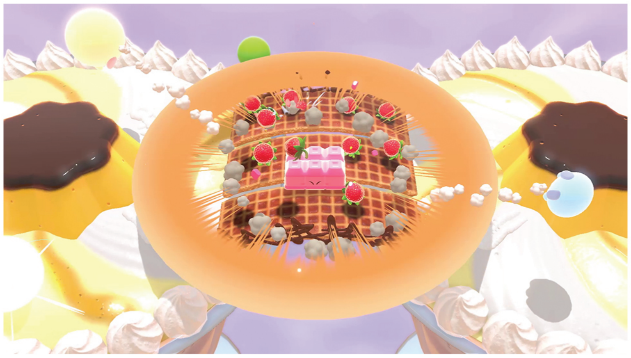
The races are complemented by frantic berry-eating minigames that take place in small, contained arenas and last only a few seconds, as well as by battle royales in which all the Kirbys fight it out with a bunch of different Copy Food Abilities. The whole spectacle has the vibe of the Mario Party series, as it's an unserious multiplayer competition in which you're just as likely to win due to pure luck as any real skill.

Where Kirby's Dream Buffet falls off, though, is in accommodating full multiplayer sessions. Local play only allows for two human players – so you're always forced to compete against two computers. True four-human competitions can only take place through the game's online mode – but matchmaking against randoms doesn't really work (in my experience). So you'd have to get a group organized to play at the same time using the online friend system, and that might be more trouble than it's worth.

Not being able to get a full game of four Kirbys going in one living room also drains away some of the value of the pricepoint, which is otherwise attractive at just $14.99. Still, that's the only real drawback in this design. Overall, Kirby's Dream Buffet is delightful, and makes me hopeful that more mid-tier games starring Nintendo's biggest names could make their way into the eShop in the future. Not every game has to be an epic journey! Sometimes it's nice to just have one slice of cake. **– LUCAS**

SWITCH
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RATING: E

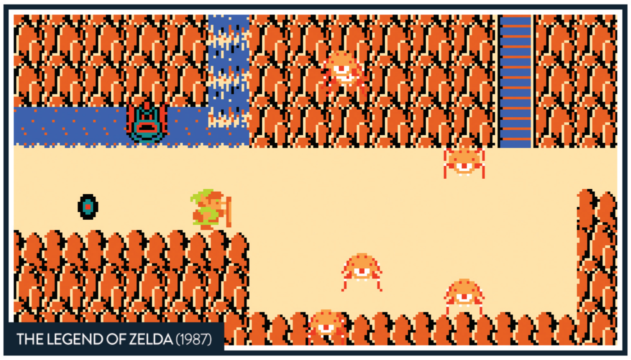
8.0



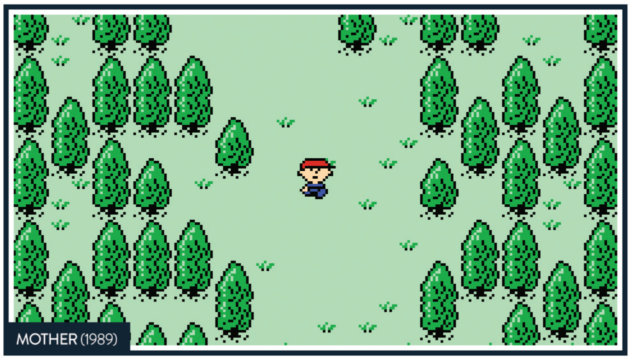
WIDE OPEN SPACES

With games like Breath of the Wild and its upcoming sequel, as well as the Pokémon series' Scarlet & Violet and Legends: Arceus earlier this year, Nintendo seems to have finally fully embraced open-world environments. It took a long time for them to open up to open worlds, though! Let's look back across the ages to examine how in-game exploration has expanded over time.

BY JONATHAN HOLMES



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1987)



MOTHER (1989)

IT ALL STARTED in 1986 with a hard yellow disk. The Hyrule Fantasy: Zeruda no Densetsu (later localized as The Legend of Zelda) was an innovative new title for the Japanese Famicom Disk System that, for the very first time, let players save their progress on the game itself. This ability to rewrite data changed console gaming forever, allowing for bigger, more nonlinear world designs that just wouldn't have worked if you had to start over from scratch every time. As you can see on Pages 56 and 57 of this issue, Zelda 1's Hyrule isn't actually *that* large, but at the time, it felt endlessly explorable.

Anyone who's played through Zelda 1 before is less likely to see that map as a massive atlas, and more likely to view it as a scrapbook of warm memories. Every screen contains something thoughtful: a deliberately placed secret passage; a layout of trees or rocks designed to facilitate a tense land battle; a log or boulder that's meant to arouse suspicion; or a hidden money-gifting Moblin. The amount of discoverable stuff in the original Zelda made it feel like a natural environment, but it was a purely man-made, painstakingly curated piece of art; more museum than mountain range.

Though the Disk System was a miracle in memory storage, this was still the '80s, a time when most commercial software was measured out in handfuls of kilobytes. Space was at a premium. Everything needed to serve a purpose.

Nintendo's struggle between making their open world games feel believably big and lovingly handmade would be a running theme for over three decades. After Zelda, their next attempt in the genre was Mother (now known as EarthBound Beginnings), a turn-based RPG created by essayist and television personality Shigesato Itoi. Heavily influenced by the Dragon Quest series – and its blend of Eastern and Western styles that had taken Japan by storm – Itoi's plan was to tell a story about modern day psychic children exploring a strange-but-familiar version of Earth, filled with a bevy of real-life problems and supernatural surprises.

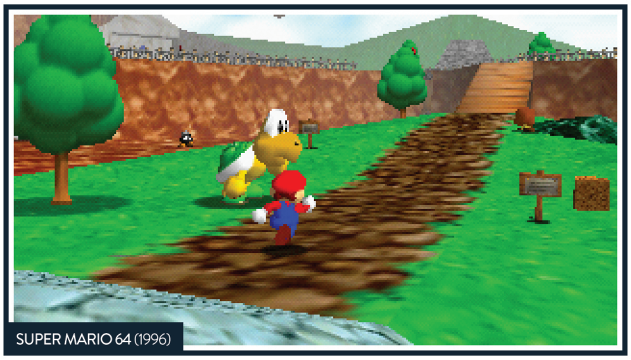
Shigeru Miyamoto was skeptical about allowing a non-game designer develop for Nintendo. Though he did eventually give Mother the greenlight, it wasn't released out of Japan for over 25 years – perhaps because Nintendo wasn't crazy about the way it was designed. Its concept was wonderful, but actually trekking around Mother's large, often uneventful cities and fields can be a momentum killer. Over time, the game would become massively important to Nintendo, and to video games as a whole. Its brand of quirky but approachable magical realism helped inspire two direct sequels, the creation of the Pokémon franchise and, eventually, the entire "Mother-like" indie RPG subgenre. But as an open world adventure in its own right, it didn't go very far.

The very next year after Mother was released, Miyamoto and his team put out their biggest "world" to date: Super Mario World! For the first time in the franchise's history, there were not separate "level-world" designations that could be warped to with whistles or secret pipes. Instead, there was one humongous, interconnected map of stages that could be hopped on and re-traveled to, again and again. In true Miyamoto fashion, every area could hold a number of secrets designed to evoke wonder, but none of them were stuffed in for filler's sake. The path to the end boss of Super Mario World is a relatively straightforward one, but true explorers could backtrack to unlock even more secret passages, levels and worlds, each leading to a series of obstacles that were perfectly scaled to match the level of skill that players would need to have reached to unlock them in the first place.

Nintendo was opening Mario up to the concept of open spaces, and soon after, they'd also open him up to a collaboration with SquareSoft, the premier RPG designers of the day. 1996's Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars was a joint effort between Square and Nintendo, and the results are still talked about today. Not only did the game allow Mario to move on the X, Y and Z axes, but it also brought on a previously unseen level of dimension to the lives of the Mushroom Kingdom's inhabitants. While Mario remained silent, other party members like

SUPER MARIO WORLD (1991)

SUPER MARIO RPG: LEGEND OF THE SEVEN STARS (1996)


SUPER MARIO 64 (1996)

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: OCARINA OF TIME (1998)

Mallow, Peach, Geno and even the dreaded Bowser added plenty of colorful characterization to the adventure. The combination of lovingly crafted dialogue and painstakingly made environments gave players their first small glimpse of what it would be like to really live in the land of Toads and Koopas.

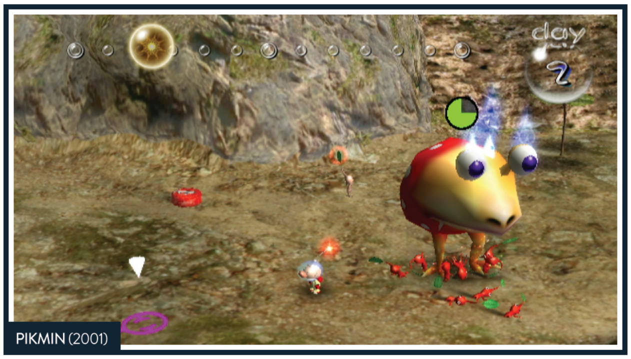
Then came the N64 and its promise of polygon-powered, real analog traversal of truly three-dimensional landscapes. Super Mario 64 was the first of its kind, a fully realized 3D exploration platformer made of a series of virtual playgrounds, all spoking out from the game's central hub: none other than Peach's Castle! Though most areas could be successfully approached with traditional platforming, players could now consider walking around enemies and obstacles instead of feeling forced to vault over them. Finding secrets didn't just mean punching every block or ducking on every pipe anymore; now you could liberally utilize the free camera to look behind walls to see if there was something special behind them, and even fly through the air with the power of the Wing Cap. The sky was the limit!

The things Mario 64 did for open-world gaming are still an active inspiration to indie and AAA developers alike, but even they would pale in comparison to the influence of the console's next massive tentpole production: The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. It offered players a fully open, always connected, multi-layered country to explore and engage with. Like Mario, Link could run and jump, but never content to follow in his mustached big brother's footsteps, he also brought auto-targeting, blocking, dynamic weapon switching, first-person projectile aiming, hookshotting across massive spaces and many more forms of engagement to bustling villages, arid plains and dastardly dungeons. And that's not even touching Link's greatest power of all: the ability to become his fully adult self! The game literally and figuratively brought the series to the next stage of maturation, holding on to everything that made it wonderful in the past while catapulting into gaming's future.

And yet, the N64 itself was not a hit on the same level that the SNES and NES were. Nintendo's embrace of 3D open worlds had blown minds and wowed critics, but as a whole, the publisher was no longer the #1 name in home consoles. Ocarina of Time sold a whopping 7,600,000 copies before being ported to future systems, but that's still less than the 10,000,000+ units that Final Fantasy VII moved on the PS1 around the same time. The market was giving Nintendo mixed messages, and they would soon return the favor with their next mutation of nonlinear adventure games.

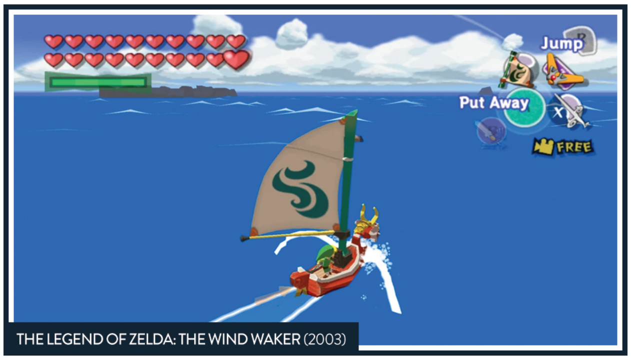
The GameCube arrived in 2001 with three launch window titles, all of which totally played against type. Luigi's Mansion and Super Smash Bros. Melee offered up familiar faces, but fans looking for a continuation of the open exploration they'd come to expect from Mario 64 and Ocarina of Time would have to look elsewhere. Specifically, their best bet was Pikmin, a resource management real-time strategy game spearheaded by Shigeru Miyamoto that once again let you wander into the woods in a unique way. Series star Olimar was both phonetically and mechanically a backwards Mario. He couldn't jump or become super. Instead, he relied on the special powers of an army of carrot people to get around a huge, threatening version of our real-life backyards. Like Zelda, Pikmin trusted players to stay strong in the face of the unknown, but with the added stresses of a day/night cycle, not to mention the prospect of being stranded on an alien planet forever. But Miyamoto would never ask players to take a chance on a game that wasn't expertly designed. As with all his projects, nothing in Pikmin was just thrown in there randomly. Every area has a puzzle to solve, a lesson to learn and a Eureka moment to inspire in the player's mind.

This was around the same time that the PlayStation 2 got Grand Theft Auto 3, a Tarantino-esque, gritty, realistic crime simulator that let you go anywhere and do anything in a believably modern city. It also isn't all that thoughtfully designed, packed with arbitrarily placed buildings, cars, streets and people who

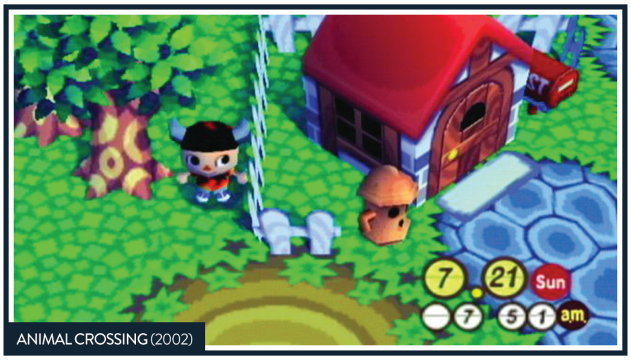


PIKMIN (2001)

GRAND THEFT AUTO III (2001)



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: THE WIND WAKER (2003)



ANIMAL CROSSING (2002)

only exist to be messed with. Despite this divorce from traditional "gamey" design elements, it was a huge hit, and went on to (arguably) be as influential as any of Nintendo's titles. You might think then that Nintendo would follow suit and stop making cuter, smaller, smarter games in favor of trying their hand at big blockbusters starring regular men being bad to others. But they refused! Instead, they set out to make even more world-wandering games that double down on abstract weirdness.

And Mario and Zelda were barely involved with the lot of them! Super Mario Sunshine and The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker both came midway through the Cube's lifespan, and neither made for any drastic changes to the road map laid out by their forebears. It's like Nintendo looked at the N64 innovators that predated them both and said aloud, "Let's just add water!" With Mario Sunshine, it was liquid you shot from a backpack, (and sometimes, Yoshi's stomach). With Wind Waker, it was a great blue ocean to sail through. Either way, it was the H2O, not any drastic changes to the structure, controls or overall design philosophies, that was there to make these two different.

It took a whole new kid on the block to strongly define GameCube-era Nintendo's approach to open worlds: Animal Crossing. It felt like a direct response to the popularity of GTA 3 and other massive, mean-spirited open world titles. Where GTA was big and abrasive, Animal Crossing was small and cozy. In most Western exploration games, you were rewarded for hurting people. In Animal Crossing, the worst you can do to someone is write them a nasty letter or make them fall in a hole for a little bit. While GTA is about taking and breaking, Animal Crossing is about giving and making. It's a game where determining who you are comes from doing small projects, forming warm relationships and making things a little bit better every day. Like with the original Zelda, every screen had potential treats to find and small things to try, except this time, the goal wasn't to fight monsters to save a princess. Instead, the point was to just enjoy your life.

And it wasn't much of a hit! It wasn't a flop either, but there was no question that Animal Crossing was not on its way to being a GTA-level success. At least not yet. The days of industry dominance for K.K. Slider and his friends would only come after nearly two decades of iterations on this particular style of easy-going life simulators.

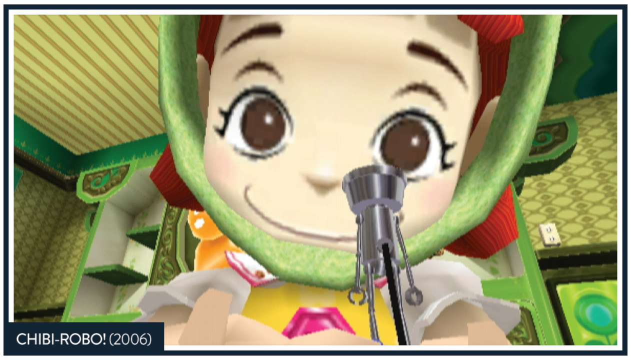
On the whole, these experiments with small wonders came fast and furious. In 2002, Nintendo put out Cubivore, a wholly original open world action game. It tapped into the same primitive, predatory mentality that makes the GTA "sociopath simulator" scenario tick, but instead of playing as a person who acts like a beast, you're a literal animal who's made out of cubes. You eat, poop, have babies and die, over and over again, all in little natural environments, and always at your own pace. Like with Mother, this was another one that NOA didn't seem to fully believe in, but it was eventually published outside of Japan by Atlus.

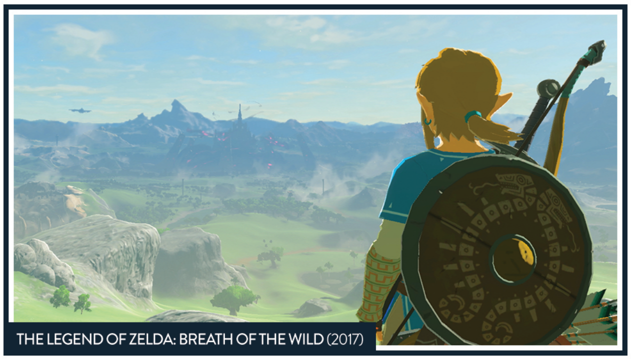
GiFTPiA, an extremely Animal Crossing-looking village-based adventure game, wasn't so lucky. It was the first of multiple collaborations between Nintendo and a fledgling studio called Skip Ltd., including the Chibi-Robo! series, Captain Rainbow and Snowpack Park. While it never left Japan, its mischievous, but largely nonviolent spirit carried forward into countless Nintendo games to follow. The way to progress in GiFTPiA is to help others. The game recognized that may seem like a foreign concept to gamers who were used to being encouraged to be as selfish as possible, so it starts off from the perspective of an irresponsible teenager who's only interested in pursuing his own oblivious whims. But over time, he learns we're all connected, and the more he does for the people in his community, the more he's really doing for himself.

Again, Nintendo had no optimism that a game like this would do well outside of Japan, but they did have some hope for Chibi-Robo!, Skip's next title for the GameCube. Starring a diminutive toy robot, Chibi-Robo! is less conventional than even Cubivore and Animal Crossing. While the title has a few tacked-on action elements where you have to shoot little spider

CUBIVORE (2002)

GiFTPiA (2003)


CHIBI-ROBO! (2006)


THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD (2017)

robots or run through a tricky area in a certain amount of time, more than anything, it's about wandering around the house cleaning up your host family's messes, both physical and emotional. See a small stain on the ground? Scrub it out with a toothbrush to gain some "happiness points" for the people you live with. Hear that the family matriarch is planning to divorce her husband? Hatch your own scheme to make that man less of an irritating slob. Despite being E-rated, some of the themes in Chibi-Robo! are much more mature than those of 90% of the M-rated games in stores today.

The people who liked these little electric empathy exercises loved it, but it was far from a big seller. Maybe the themes of the game were just too psychological for your average game buyer to easily pick up? It was less about playing with virtual toys and more about being the kid in a household who tries to take care of everyone else. By facing the flaws of his family, he ultimately comes to love them even more.

You'd think seeing Chibi-Robo! fail to become the next big thing might scare Skip off from making more games about confronting ugly truths. Nope! Instead, they doubled down on that theme with Captain Rainbow. It's a lot like GiFTPiA, but instead of wandering around a small village helping your neighbors, you walk around a little island and help "misfit" Nintendo characters like Takamura from The Mysterious Murasame Castle, Tracy from Link's Awakening, Punch-Out!!'s Little Mac and Birdo from Super Mario Bros. 2. It too was never brought outside of Japan. Even without being localized, though, it was a massive financial failure. Once again, Nintendo's move to make their exploration games "adult" in ways that weren't about wanton violence wasn't bringing in big audiences. Peaceful, intimate, nonlinear adventures packed with self-deprecating humor and tiny kindnesses just weren't cutting it.

Even the Legend of Zelda series started to suffer because of its similarity to these Skip-type open world titles. Skyward Sword was raked over the coals by critics who complained that its areas were too small, there were too many little sidequests about getting to know your neighbors, and that walking around your little town in the sky was boring. They also wanted to see less hand-holding, but how could Nintendo give them that while still making games where every interaction between the player and environment was deliberately and intimately pre-planned?

The answer is, they made Breath of the Wild. After being initially prototyped in an engine that looked and played just like the original Legend of Zelda, Nintendo managed to make a game that was at least 10 times bigger than every Zelda before it, that's completely nonlinear after the opening area, and is still jam-packed with specifically authored secrets, puzzles and points of connection. It took a massive level of commitment, not to mention trust in their audiences' ability to do it on their own. With no fairy to guide you or slow-paced tutorial area to get you up to speed, it throws players in the deep end pretty quickly. But that trust paid off. Breath of the Wild became the best-selling game in Zelda series history, and one of the most loved, enduring games of the generation.

That goes double for Animal Crossing: New Horizons, which is currently the second best-selling Switch title of all-time. It still takes place in a little town, and it's still cozy, but now you can change every aspect of your village, including the topography, before heading out to visit friends in their own homesteads. Again, Nintendo found a middle ground between designing everything and giving players the opportunity to make their experiences their own. That combination brought players in by the millions.

Finally, Nintendo has opened up the Pokémon series. New titles allow players to explore enormous lands in any direction, catching and battling in whatever order they choose.

Now headed toward four decades of developing in this genre, Nintendo has finally found the right balance between making digital playgrounds that express their own creative concepts, and allowing their work to be vessels for their players' own dreams and decisions. It's the best of both (open) worlds, and the future for the genre has never looked brighter! **— JONATHAN**

ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS (2020)

POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS (2022)

BY LINDSEY LAYNE KING

POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET

The all-new Paldea region has been built for open-world exploration!

WE'VE ADVENTURED IN Alola. We've gallivanted in Galar. We've hit the road in Hisui and crisscrossed across Kanto more times than we can count! But even with all those stamps from the past on our Pokémon passports, none of us has ever explored an area quite like Paldea before.

Gone are the days of numbered routes guiding us directly from one town to the next. Now, Pokémon journeys will be a free-roaming experience, in which every players' path is totally different from every other's.

SWITCH PUBLISHERS: NINTENDO & THE POKÉMON COMPANY DEVELOPER: GAME FREAK RELEASE: NOVEMBER 18, 2022 RATING: E

Pokémon Scarlet & Violet's full embrace of open-world game design comes as the culmination of years of steady progress to arrive at this point. We've traced that evolution before, but let's hit the high points once more before Paldea opens it doors.

Pokémon Sun & Moon got this process started, as Gen VII's Alola region was the first to not be built on a grid. X & Y three years earlier had a bit more freedom in player character movement than before, but Trainers would always snap back into stepping one square at a time when you got done skating, betraying the fact that every piece of the overworld was just a regular rectangle underneath after all. Sun & Moon's Alolan islands flowed with natural curves and elevation changes in their landscapes, though – we were finally getting to explore a world that felt more real.

But its routes were still pretty linear, with "Point A to Point B" progression from one story moment to the next. The series didn't take its next step toward a more open world until Generation VIII, with Pokémon Sword & Shield. In those games, the Galar region remained mostly traditionally designed, but a massive Wild Area broke the mold in the middle of its map. While exploring in the Wild Area, players got full control of the camera and could run or ride their bike in any direction they wanted! It was starting to feel truly Breath of the Wild-ish.

Sword & Shield made a big splash on Switch with that Wild Area as a key point in their marketing materials, and The Pokémon Company was eager to sell consumers on an even more free exploration experience with their DLC. The Isle of Armor and Crown Tundra expansion areas were even larger Wild Area-like go-anywhere zones: fully explorable spaces with a variety of different caves, forests and other points of interest to discover without having to wait for loading screens between any of them. Then, just earlier this year, we got Pokémon Legends: Arceus being marketed as the series' first true open world game – a complete adventure designed from the ground up to offer total freedom of exploration.

. . . But the Hisui region in Legends: Arceus didn't quite get its open world all the way right. You wouldn't be wrong to declare it as an open world game, but its take on the ancient land (that would one day be renamed to be Sinnoh) was still carved up into a few separate chunks. Jubilife Village was the hub/home base, and you always had to return to the village to give the game a chance to load the next big area before heading out into the wild again – you couldn't go straight from, say, the Cobalt Coastlands to the Alabaster Icelands.

Now, though, Game Freak and The Pokémon Company are promising that Paldea will be the most freely explorable region yet, with no loading zones holding you back from traveling as far north, south, east and west as you want across a massive map filled with sights to see and monsters to catch. Will they be able to pull it off?

PREPARE FOR TROUBLE

Listen, I would love to finally end this story of the series' open world evolution and declare Scarlet & Violet as the definitive realization of players' hopes and dreams for "Breath of the Wild" Pokémon. But I don't want to overhype this new pair of sequels! The reality is that Paldea will represent another step forward, but there will surely be more progress to make beyond this point.

For example, we know that loading screens are not entirely eliminated from the adventure quite yet. The central city, Mesagoza, is too elaborately designed for it to be connected to the open world beyond its city limits. It's possible that we'll discover other separated parts of the map as we get into the full game and explore further, too. (That swirling mass of clouds in the middle of the region seems like a set-apart area as well.)

What's more, Poké players should prepare themselves for performance problems. I've said it before and I unfortunately have to say it again, but the core Pokémon series development team at Game Freak has never been the most proficient when it comes to tackling the technical side of game design. Ever since this series launched with a pair of black-and-white Game Boy games several years after the peak of that handheld hardware had already passed by, they've been behind the times – playing catch-up with the rest of the industry for over 25 years now. It kind of boggles my mind that even with the massive amounts of money that Pokémon makes, Game Freak seems to have never decided to staff up to the point of having enough hands on deck to iron out the performance issues that plague every new release. I guess they just feel like they don't have to?

Yes, people will buy Pokémon titles even if they look like garbage and run with a framerate that makes a strobe light seem fast. So don't be surprised if Scarlet & Violet's extra-large open-world ambitions get counterbalanced by performance aspects that will make The Digital Foundry cry. It's just the way of Pokémon at this point.

GET READY TO RIDE

Regardless of how choppy or ugly some moments end up being here, it's still going to be an epic adventure! (And I'm sure the vast majority of players will have no complaints even if they do notice technical oddities.) So let's put that negativity behind us and start ramping the hype back up by going over the feature list for this new sequel. There's a ton to talk about!

Let's start with the cover stars: Koraidon and Miraidon, appearing on the game boxes for Scarlet and Violet, respectively. And also appearing on the flippable double cover for this NF issue . . . where they're looking a little different than when we first saw them?

Yes, both of the box Legendaries this time around have a motorcycle mode! You'll befriend one of the two of them, then be able to ride on its back like a bike, zipping across the wide open spaces of Paldea much faster than you'd be able to walk or run with just your human character's two feet.

But they're more versatile than just being land vehicles! Both Koraidon and Miraidon will also be able to swim across bodies of water *and* glide in the sky as well. Pokémon Legends: Arceus split all these riding roles among several different Pokémon: Wyrdeer was the land master, Basculegion was the water transport, etc. But Scarlet & Violet have streamlined all of that functionality into a single supermon.

HIT THE GYMS

So we've got an all-new region to see, and an all-new ride to use to see it. Where do you think we should go?

Game Freak's built three different adventures into Scarlet & Violet, and you can tackle them in any order you like. Focus on one while ignoring the others – or mix and match their tasks!

The first adventure is the usual Gym Challenge. On a mission to be the best Pokémon battler possible, you'll seek out Gyms scattered around the region, challenge their Gym Leaders to battle and take home a Badge when you emerge victorious. Earn eight Badges total and you'll be all set to take on Paldea's Elite Four and the local Champion. (Most likely. I'm just assuming that last part will remain the same as normal.)

What's different in Paldea, though, is that there's no set order you have to visit the Gyms in! One of the closest to the central city is a Grass-type Gym, meaning lots of Trainers will probably hit it up first. But you don't have to! You can save it for last if you like!

I'm excited about this new level of nonlinearity . . . but I'm also a little wary. I'm worried Game Freak won't balance the levels of the Gyms to account for your team's current average, meaning some Gyms might stay too tough to tackle until later. Here's hoping I'm wrong, though.

TAKE ON TEAM STAR

The second available adventure is centered around Team Star, the new villainous team in the Paldea region. (Though "villainous" may be too strong a word for them – they're more like troublemaking teens.) These kids have set up forts around the region, and if you come across one, you can choose to "storm" inside, which then triggers a flurry of battles.

Not traditional battles, though! A new kind of auto-battling is being introduced in these games, in which you pick your Pokémon and they just dash around bopping opponents with no direct commands from you, or even specific moves being used.

After overcoming a gauntlet of these auto-battles, though, things swing more back to normal when you face off against the resident Team Star leader. Like Gym Leaders, they'll fight you with one particular type of 'mon – Mela, seen above, represents the Fire type and will toss out a Torkoal to try to take you down.

Also like Gym Leaders, Team Star's stars will apparently award you a Badge when you beat them! Scarlet & Violet, as it turns out, will have 18 different Badges to earn! Some will come from Gyms, some from these Team Star battles and some from the third adventure on offer. So let's talk about that one next!

TACKLE THE TITANS

You'll recall from earlier previews of these titles that Scarlet & Violet will cast you as a student at an exclusive academy. The third adventure taps into this more fully than the others, since it involves you teaming up with an upperclassman named Arven to help with his scholarly research!

Arven is scouring the Paldea region for Herba Mystica, which are rare plants useful in making potent medicines. The problem is that each of these elusive herbs is being guarded by a massive protector Pokémon called a Titan! And Arven isn't such a great battler, so he needs your help to take down these fearsome foes.

We've seen oversized Pokémon like the Titans in past games, from the Totem Pokémon of Sun & Moon to the Nobles in Legends: Arceus. This time around, it seems like you'll have to seek out and battle these big beasts multiple times before they'll be beaten once and for all – and they'll also have extra-large health meters to deal with.

This herb-hunting expedition – referred to in-game as The Path of Legends – seems like it might have a few extra secrets in store, and I'm eager to learn more. Like, will we be able to catch the Titans after beating them in battle? I'd assume not, but it would be pretty amazing to have that supermassive Klawf on my team!

POKÉMON CRYSTAL?

No matter which path you pick in your Paldean playthrough, there are more new gameplay wrinkles you're sure to run into! The biggest is the new battle gimmick for Gen IX. Like X & Y had Mega Evolutions, Sun & Moon brought us Z-Moves and Sword & Shield went big on Dynamaxing/Gigantamaxing, Scarlet & Violet will debut a temporary transformation called Terastallization.

Pokémon that Terastallize in the middle of a battle are visually changed to look like shining crystals are all over their bodies. They also get an elaborate chandelier-like headdress/hat on their heads that represents one of the 18 different Pokémon types: Fire, Water, Grass, etc. Terastallization changes the type of the Pokémon to match the shiny crystal hat they've just put on.

This introduces a new layer of strategy for the series' old standby Rock/Paper/Scissors system that determines which monsters are weak to which moves. For example, you might find yourself using a Water-type in a match against a Grass-type foe. Normally their super-effective Grass moves would give your opponent a huge advantage! But if you activate Terastallization to suddenly change your Water-type into a Fire-type, then the tables would turn and *you'd* have the type advantage!

You can't pick and choose which of the 18 types you want in the moment, though, as every Pokémon in Paldea has a natural Tera type in addition to their usual type — that will determine the new form they'll always take when this mechanic is used. So if you want to build a truly competitive battling team, you'll need to assemble a set of not only six complementary normal type combos, but also half a dozen Tera types that mesh together too!

RETURN OF THE RAIDS

One big part (literally) of Sword & Shield was raid battling, in which four Trainers would join forces to take on one supersized Pokémon opponent. Raids are back in Scarlet & Violet, but with Terastallized Pokémon as the targets instead. You'll need to work in unison with your fellow Trainers to take them down, and if you do, you'll each have a chance to catch it!

Taking on raids together seems like one of the main focuses of the four-Trainer multiplayer that's also being included in Scarlet & Violet. Though you'll also be able to just cruise around the countryside in a group. And you'll apparently be able to snap selfies together too? It'll be interesting to see the extent of what's possible, because people were asking for a Pokémon MMO years before Breath of the Wild became the game everyone wanted the Pokémon series to copy.

BECOME A SANDWICH ARTIST

If I'm being honest, I have paid almost zero attention to the food-making minigames in previous Pokémon generations. You could cook up curry in the Galar region, bake some Poffins in Sinnoh, feed Poké Beans to your team in Alola . . . and even brew coffee with them? I don't know for sure. I really never took the time to learn.

But Scarlet & Violet get my tummy rumbling — because in these games you can make mouth-watering sandwiches! Huge foot-long lunches piled high with all kinds of tasty toppings. Including meat!? What animals does meat even come from in the Pokémon world? We're getting into some weird territory now.

Making sandwiches — and doing a good job — will award you bonuses to aid your exploration, like increasing the likelihood of certain types of Pokémon to appear in the wild. Want to find a lot of Fire-types? Splash on a ton of hot sauce! (I'm assuming.)

ROUNDING UP THE REST

A few other pre-release tidbits to report: You'll be able to customize your Trainer with any clothing or hairstyle you want, as gender restrictions on certain selections have been removed; the easy menu that let you teach moves to your monsters in Pokémon Legends: Arceus is back; you can sneak up and toss a Poké Ball at a wild monster to start a battle like in Legends: Arceus as well (though you can't catch them directly that way); and there will be a day/night cycle, but it won't be tied into the real-world time as set on your Switch system. I'm certain there are many more features we'll find as we set off into the full adventure too — and that's happening soon! Scarlet & Violet will be available on November 18! Safe travels on all of your journeys in Paldea! **— LUCAS**

SMOLIV

Half Grass, half Normal and all anxious, this worried little olive might not be the most willing battler.

GRAFAIAI

The Toxic Monkey Pokémon, this Poison/Normal-type paints noxious art with long, ooze-dripping fingers.

LECHONK

This playf… r probably isn't too pleased that picni… serve ham sandwiches.

CYCLIZAR

This Dragon/Normal-type looks like it could be the pre-evolution of Koraidon or Miraidon. Will it be?

PALDEAN WOOPER

Regional variants return! One old monster getting a fresh makeover is Wooper, who's now Poison/Ground.

WIGLETT

But here's a curveball! This one looks like a regional variant of Diglett, but it's actually a new species!

ARMAROUGE

An intimidating Fire/Psychic-type that will only be available to players of Pokémon Scarlet.

NEW 'MONS OF THE PALDEA REGION!

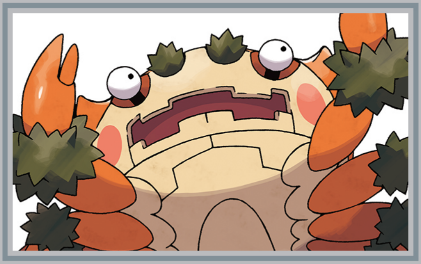
While new Pokémon series sequels can add features, remove features, shift the whole structure of play or keep things traditional, at the end of the day no change to the gameplay or presentation will ever outshine the real stars of the show: the brand-new Pokémon creatures we'll be able to encounter and catch for the first time ever! You already know the three starters – Sprigatito, Fuecoco and Quaxly – as well as the box art Legendaries, Koraidon and Miraidon. So here are 14 other fresh faces to find!

CERULEDGE

The counterpart to Armarouge, this Fire/Ghost warrior can only be caught in Pokémon Violet.

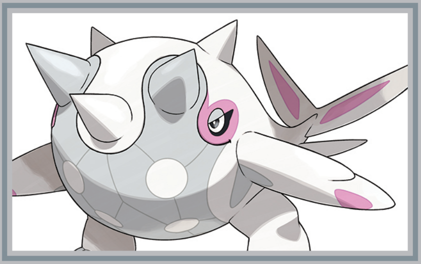
PAWMI

Pikachu clones are a dime a doz… Pawmi here is the series' latest…



KLAWF

Beware the Pokémon series' latest Giant Enemy Crab! This Rock-type titan is ready for clobberin' time!



CETITAN

Not to be outdone by Rock, the Ice type has also recruited a new heavy hitter: this land-walking whale!

FARIGIRAF

At long last, Gen II's Girafarig has received its long-awaited evolution! Farigiraf remains Normal/Psychic.

FIDOUGH

In the tradition of Vanillite, Alcremie and Appletun, this doughy dog looks like it could be a tasty dessert!

BELLIBOLT

Finally, this jovial Electric-type frog generates power with its big, bouncing belly. Don't get zapped!

TACTICS OGRE: REBORN

The '90s strategy classic is getting a fresh coat of paint.

IT'S ALWAYS COOL to see older games become more accessible and reach completely new players, and acclaimed tactical RPG Tactics Ogre is receiving this treatment for a second time!

It all began with the release of Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together in 1995 for Super Famicom in Japan. It came West three years later in 1998 on PlayStation. Then, the game was remade in 2011 for the PlayStation Portable with several additions: more story elements, extra characters and updated systems.

Tactics Ogre: Reborn is a remaster of that 2011 version, and it will bring in its own set of updates when it arrives on November 11. The visuals and sound will get tune-ups via new HD backgrounds and characters, remastered sound effects, fully voiced dialogue in English and Japanese and the soundtrack being re-recorded with a live orchestra, according to a Square Enix blog post.

Gameplay updates involve improving accessibility with quicker battles, auto saves and a new interface and controls. Enemy A.I. has been tweaked to better adapt to battle map environments, and units will level up individually rather than by class.

For those who haven't experienced Tactics Ogre, you can expect tactical RPG essentials including deep political themes and strategic combat, in which you command units on a grid-based battlefield.

The game takes place on a group of islands called the Valerian Isles. They have a tumultuous history, where three groups — the Bakram, Galgastani and Walister — have long fought for control. The game begins with the Valerian Isles in a tense situation, as the Bakram (Valeria's nobility) and Galgastani (which includes most of the islands' population), retain control after a recent civil war.

Players will assume the role of Denam Pavel, who's a part of the Walister Resistance. Denam, his sister Catiua, his childhood friend Vyce and their allies will fight against both the Bakrim and Galgastani in this tale.

As Denam, you'll have plenty of agency as you make choices that will affect the story's branching narrative, lead to possible character deaths and result in multiple endings. At the start of the game, you'll answer questions from tarot cards that will determine his starting stats, which deity he'll follow and what element he wields.

Tarot cards also offer helpful benefits beyond the start of the game, like rewinding turns on the battlefield and going back in time to change a story-effecting choice you made.

While progressing through the story, Denam will recruit allies that can be used in combat. Tactics Ogre features the Recovery Time System in battle, where turn order is determined via characters' agility stats and type of equipment.

Each scenario will allow a specific number of units on the battlefield and a condition that must be met to achieve victory. The rest is up to you, and there are many paths to get there considering the sheer amount of units, classes, equipment and combinations to choose from.

The classes span from mainstays like Warrior, Archer, Rogue and Cleric to some more unique archetypes like Terror Knight, which excels at debuffs, and Fusilier, an expert at powerful ranged weapons. Not to mention you can also command dragons, golems and other creatures.

2022 has already been an amazing year for strategy RPGs with games like Triangle Strategy, DioField Chronicle and others. Fans will have yet another one to feast on when Tactics Ogre is reborn in November! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: NOVEMBER 11, 2022 RATING: T

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

An all-new story with an all-new cast . . . who can summon heroes from the past!

SCHOOL'S OUT.

In 2019, the Switch saw the release of Fire Emblem: Three Houses, which centered its narrative on the Officers Academy at Garreg Mach Monastery. It was a school story (to begin with, at least), as players stepped into the role of a teacher who had to choose just one of three different classes of pupils to become the playable characters for the campaign ahead. More than that, though, the story would wildly diverge depending on that early selection of students — so much so that you didn't see all there was to see in the game unless you went back and replayed it from the beginning multiple times, making different choices with each fresh playthrough.

I never found the time to do that. I enjoyed the time I spent with Three Houses, but because I picked only the Golden Deer house, I only ended up experiencing a fraction of the total narrative. And then things got even more complicated when the Cindered Shadows extra story was added via DLC, and then even more complicated again when Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes launched recently and presented yet another spin on that same story and setting. Three Houses was really a lot to deal with!

So I'm personally excited that it seems like the series' next sequel, Fire Emblem Engage, seems to be more straightforward. In this adventure, it doesn't look like there's any timeline-shifting decision you have to make right at the start. You just need to pick whether you'll play as the male or female version of the new protagonist!

Alear is their name, and they're set apart from the rest of the cast by a wild split-colored hairstyle that has had a lot of fans rolling with laughter. The half blue/half red look has been compared to everything from a pair of Switch Joy-Cons to a dollop of tooth-paste! The striking design was created by Mika Pikazo, an artist previously known for designing VTubers. It's definitely got a modern vibe!

Having such a "now" leading hero makes for a good contrast against the other big stars of this sequel: a bunch of "then" supporting heroes pulled out of past Fire Emblem installments. Alear and their allies who live in the present of this new game world are able to find and equip Emblem Rings — doing so then lets them summon the spirit of an ancient warrior like Marth (from the first Fire Emblem game) or Sigurd (from the still-never-localized Genealogy of the Holy War) or Celica (recently seen in Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia). Together, the character actually living in this world and the ghostly presence from the past will then charge into battle in unison, combining their might.

(Is it a little funny that a game with the subtitle "Engage" has such a big focus on rings? Some lucky FE series fans are definitely going to be getting proposed to when this game arrives.)

The last eye-catching part of this new sequel reveal was the incredible quality of the graphics on display! The developers at Intelligent Systems have really stepped up their game on the visual presentation side of things, as we're now getting in-game character models and animations that appear to be on par with the quality previously only seen in pre-rendered cutscenes back in titles like Awakening or Fates. Even the environments have been upgraded, so battles should have a better sense of place as they play out!

We're just scratching the surface of Fire Emblem Engage, so be sure you come back next time for an even more in-depth look. And as Alear would say, "Always remember to brush your teeth!" **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYS.
RELEASE: JANUARY 20, 2023 RATING: T

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

The sequel to Breath of the Wild is set to soar soon!

THE NEXT ZELDA finally has a name!

The game we've been calling "Breath of the Wild 2" since its reveal at E3 2019 has at last been officially titled. Ladies and gentlemen, prepare yourselves for an all-new adventure in The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom!

. . . Well, a *mostly* new adventure. As we've known for years now, this sequel takes place in the same Hyrule we first explored in Breath of the Wild: the expansive open world that was filled to overflowing with mountains to climb, villages to visit, trees to chop down, Korok Seeds to seek out and Shrines to unearth. Its same landscape will serve as the primary setting again.

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: MAY 12, 2023 RATING: RP

But newly added to this familiar world are dozens of brand-new islands – not out in the ocean, but rather floating up in the sky! So while Link might spend plenty of time running around on the ground as he first did in Breath of the Wild, it seems like this sequel will focus most of its attention on the new hovering land masses to explore up among the clouds.

IT'S ALL ABOUT VERTICALITY

Let's speculate about that separation a bit further. Breath of the Wild emphasized the grand scale of its explorable world by giving players a huge Hyrule full of interesting places to want to go see up close – then giving them the freedom to actually do it. "See that mountain in the distance? You can go there." No loading screens standing in your way. No invisible barriers either. (Well, at the very edge of the map there were, but even those were cleverly minimized.) So Breath of the Wild really emphasized the horizontal. What if the designers' philosophy for this follow-up is to focus instead on the vertical?

We got some verticality in Breath of the Wild thanks to its free climbing system – you could direct Link to scale almost any surface in the overworld, with the only limitation being his stamina meter (and cooking then eating replenishing foods to reinvigorate him partway through a long climb could ensure he'd reach the top). That verticality was included mostly in service of the horizontal exploration, though. You'd climb Sheikah towers to expand your map. You'd get to the top of a mountain, then leap off to paraglide long distances. (Both horizontal.)

This time, though, Link's ability to move up and down seems to have been greatly expanded. He can still climb freely – so that's the baseline – but in addition to that we've already seen him wield two different and all-new magical powers to elevate his altitude. One, first seen at E3 2021, has him transforming briefly into a drop of water (a tear?) before soaring straight up into the sky and passing through the solid surface of the floating island above him. Another, just shown in Nintendo's latest glimpse at the game, had him using his new power of time reversal on a boulder that had fallen from the sky. It then rewound its timeline to "fall" back up into the air, and Link leapt on to ride it up like an elevator. Finally, Link's got a new way to return to the surface too: A stone glider that looks like a bird will catch him on his way down.

So moving up and down and up again and down again seems to be the rhythm we'll get into in this game, as Link makes his way to the sky islands, explores them, returns to the surface to find a way up to the next set of sky islands, and so on. So far there doesn't seem to be any equivalent to Link's Loftwing from Skyward Sword, which offered full freedom of flight to get from island to island – I'd guess it's going to be more challenging to reach them early on, but then in the late game Link will have amassed enough power to be able to more freely go anywhere he wants in the overworld or above it.

TIERS OF THE KINGDOM

The ground-level overworld and the new islands hovering up in the sky are just two tiers on this potentially three-tiered wedding cake of an explorable world, though! It's been over three years now, so our memories might be waning, but our first look at this sequel in its first appearance in 2019 had no sky content at all. It took place entirely underground!

Nintendo's been so secretive about this project that I'm wondering if there might be a whole 'nother level of exploration that we'll get to do: crawling through caves and caverns underneath the surface of Hyrule. That was definitely the sense given off by the first teaser, which followed Link and Zelda on a subterranean expedition that ended with them discovering the decayed, disgusting, decomposing body of Ganondorf, swirling with the sinister energy of Malice. We also saw Link doing battle inside a cave in the game's second trailer. And there's a blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment in the latest video from Nintendo that shows a brand-new cave entrance has been added in the Faron region in Hyrule. A new way for Link to go underground?

I was admittedly one of those fans who thought this sequel would be finished and released fairly quickly after its announcement. After all, it's reusing a lot of the same assets! And the entire same overworld! That's got to cut down development time a ton, right? But if the new sky islands are numerous enough, and there is indeed a vast new underworld to also explore as well, then I could begin to more easily understand how it's taken the dev team this long to churn out what seemed like was originally going to be a Majora's Mask-esque two-year asset flip of a sequel.

A major underground component could also give Nintendo a way to fulfill another big fan request: making Zelda playable! Maybe Link sticks to the sky and the surface for the most part, but Zelda gets to be the one to keep the subterranean expedition going on her own? It could happen!

I don't want to go too far down the rabbit hole of speculating about a potentially playable Zelda and a big explorable underground, because if those things don't end up being a part of this sequel, I might deflate my own hype. But it would seem odd for the game's first look from 2019 not to come full-circle and really mean something, right? I guess we'll see soon!

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Finally, Nintendo apparently held off on announcing the final name of this game for so long because it could've spoiled some of the game's content. So now that we know it, does it? What could "Tears of the Kingdom" be in reference to?

Storywise it directly calls to mind sadness, of course. But isn't this a time of jubilation in Hyrule, after the victory over Ganon was achieved at the end of Breath of the Wild? Could it be talking about the tears of an earlier kingdom, perhaps? A lost kingdom from the past that Ganon destroyed before he was sealed away?

Or it could be a classic item-based subtitle like Ocarina of Time, Majora's Mask and The Wind Waker. The "Tears of the Kingdom" could be items that Link collects in his travels. Maybe each Tear grants him a new magic power? Or each one helps him purify his corrupted arm, or restore the broken Master Sword? Maybe the Tears are like the Triforce shards from the first Zelda, or the Pendants from A Link to the Past: the objects you win after successfully finishing a dungeon. *(Will there be traditional dungeons again?)*

As you can see, we're in the great pre-release phase where we know just enough about the game to be able to wildly speculate about everything we don't yet know. But all our questions will be answered in May! **– LUCAS**

KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

The 30th anniversary celebration continues!

KIRBY, KIRBY, KIRBY!

Some big franchises hit major milestones and let them pass right on by without so much as a hint of celebration – but not Kirby! The Pink Puffball has been powerfully prolific to mark the 30th anniversary of his original appearance in Kirby's Dream Land on the Game Boy back in 1992. He gave us the Game of the Year contender Kirby and the Forgotten Land back in March. Then he brought us Kirby's Dream Buffet in August. We only just got finished writing the review for that one earlier in this same issue, and already there's another new Kirby title on the horizon!

Well, not entirely new – Kirby's Return to Dream Land Deluxe is Nintendo's latest souped-up Wiimake.

Back in October 2011 – five years after the Wii hardware had first gone on sale – the Big N unleashed the original Kirby's Return to Dream Land as their latest multiplayer-focused adventure. Building off the momentum of games like New Super Mario Bros. Wii – that let four players hop and bop through the Mushroom Kingdom at the same time as four different heroes – this Kirby game let four pals romp across Dream Land as Kirby, Bandana Waddle Dee, King Dedede and Meta Knight simultaneously.

It was a joyful adventure! But also maybe a little bit overlooked, since it launched so late in the Wii's life cycle. Now it's being given a second chance to shine, with shiny new HD graphics!

The focus here is still on gathering a group of friends or family members to be able to field a full force of four fighters, each with their own powers: King Dedede bashes baddies with his heavy hammer; Meta Knight slashes mercilessly with his golden sword; Bandana Dee twirls through the air and pokes his foes with his spear. Kirby is the most powerful of all, of course, since his ability to copy the traits of enemies he inhales means he has access to a much larger and more diverse moveset than any of the others!

That discrepancy became a point of argument in some family rooms 11 years ago, since it was clear that Kirby was the most fun to play, but only one player got to play as him. This new Deluxe release fixes that, though! Each player can now choose to be Kirby if they want to, so up to four Kirbys can go on this journey at the same time.

What's more, the developers at HAL Laboratory have gone back into the core game design here and added more content! Kirby's getting at least one all-new Copy Ability in Deluxe: the Mecha power, which turns him into a laser-blasting mini Gundam guy. There will also be new minigames in the mix, like Magolor's Tome Trackers, in which all four players compete to find books that match Magolor's requests in a huge library. (I bet you didn't have "Nintendo gameifies the librarian profession" on your Kirby Anniversary bingo card.)

I'm personally incredibly excited about this release, as the Wii original launched mere weeks before I became a Dad for the first time – but now, 11 years later, I've got a whole crew of kiddos here ready to join me on the journey! I call dibs on Dedede! (He's looking extra tough since he buffed up for Forgotten Land.) – **LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: HAL LABORATORY
RELEASE: FEBRUARY 24, 2023 RATING: E10+

PIKMIN 4

See the world from a pint-sized point of view!

HAVE YOU EVER watched Honey, I Shrunk the Kids? It's a classic family comedy film from 1989 starring Rick Moranis as a kooky scientist who built a shrinking machine in his attic. His two kids (and two next-door neighbor kids) all accidentally get zapped by its shrinking laser, reducing them each to just a quarter of an inch tall. They then have to go on a perilous journey through their backyard – which, at their size, becomes a massive jungle full of blades of grass that tower over them like skyscrapers and insects that appear to be larger than elephants.

The Pikmin series has always been set at a similar scale – but you might never have really noticed. Canonically the Captain characters and the Pikmin themselves are all puny, all standing at less than an inch. Everyday items like Duracell batteries, aluminum cans and pieces of fruit that have appeared in past installments have dwarfed our protagonists and have required lots of Pikmin to work together to lift them up and carry them back to the team's home base. These are little characters.

One reason that reality hasn't always come through, though, is due to the view. The Pikmin games have traditionally kept the camera locked at a downward angle – not a directly overhead birds-eye view, but still a perspective that's always focused on the ground and never tilted too far upward to let players take in the surrounding area.

Pikmin 4 seems set to change that! This time around, the camera's been pulled down closer to the Pikmin's point of view – which has instantly reinforced how small they are in the grand scheme of the huge worlds around them. A common park bench looks positively massive when seen from underneath. A garden wall built from just a couple of bricks stacked on top of one another is an impassably large barrier. A potted plant streaks further skyward than the tallest tree in your real-world neighborhood!

It's a striking and exciting new spin on Pikmin seemingly accomplished by nothing more than an adjustment of camera placement . . . but what will its impact on the series' classic gameplay be? The overhead view is kind of inextricably intertwined with being able to see and manage squads of 100 Pikmin at a time. With this new view, will the way we control our characters shift?

Nintendo's not offering any clarity on that point quite yet . . . continuing their long, somewhat maddening silence about this game as a whole. It's been over seven years since Pikmin 4 was first mentioned by Mr. Miyamoto, and diehard fans have been waiting for more details ever since! They're just now finally trickling through, so our long-suffering patience is slowly being rewarded. It's just going to be hard to wait to see more!

Maybe pass the time by watching Honey, I Shrunk the Kids again. (Or for the first time!) **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP

FATAL FRAME: MASK OF THE LUNAR ECLIPSE

Another Lost in Untranslation game finally found!

FATAL FRAME FANS can finally stop moaning! Mask of the Lunar Eclipse, the fourth entry in the franchise, has haunted the minds of horror fans for almost 15 years. Co-directed by No More Heroes creator Suda51 and released for the Wii back in 2008, it's the only game in this ghost photography game dynasty to never leave Japan. Now it's poised to materialize for players all across the world on Switch, with a coat of HD paint too.

But why did it take so long? Unlike more recent Fatal Frame titles, the original Wii version was quite well reviewed, and even scored its own fan translation patch. That grassroots support likely played into the greenlighting of this newly de-tombed edition of the title. Strong sales of the recent Fatal Frame: Maiden of Black Water re-release probably helped too. That port managed to sell over 340,000 copies, making it one of Koei Tecmo's best sellers last year, and proving that the world still wants more from this ghastly, clammy-handed franchise.

Working as a prequel to the overall series timeline, Mask of the Lunar Eclipse takes place back in 1980. The story stars three young women who were forced into a bizarre ritual as children before returning to the scene of their trauma as adults, looking for answers. Blurred lines between memories, mental illness and meandering apparitions tie this tale together. Flipping from feelings of parental protectiveness and paranormal paranoia towards the girls and ghosts alike makes for a special brand of tension, going far beyond the simple thrill of taking polaroids of poltergeists.

This ghostly game will haunt the Switch in 2023! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KOEI TECMO DEVELOPERS: KOEI TECMO, GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE & NINTENDO RELEASE: EARLY 2023 RATING: M

MINECRAFT LEGENDS

Get ready to fight off an invasion of Piglins!

GAMING'S ALREADY GOT a lot of legends. There's the Legend of Kage, Brutal Legend, Final Fantasy Legend, Apex Legends, League of Legends and, of course, The Legend of gosh darn Zelda. That cramped-but-legendary list is about to get a little longer thank to Minecraft, and it's bringing a legion of friends along with it.

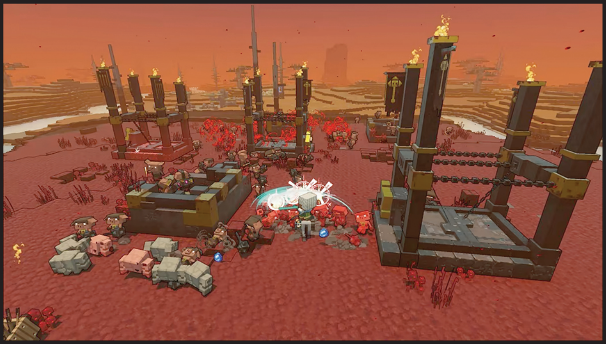
It's also bringing its fair share of Zelda references. There are Navi-esque fairies, "Pigmadillo" enemies that roll up and attack just like Gorons and a brand-new story about battling a horde of Piglins: Minecraft's equivalent to Zelda's Moblins. Will the game feature a rideable steed named Creepona, and a last boss battle against a green-skinned, red-haired tyrant named Mannondorf? I wouldn't be surprised!

Those surface-level shout-outs to LoZ don't do much to reflect what the game is really about: commanding an army of monsters and leading them into battle. While your playable character can ride a horse and swing a sword, the bulk of your power comes from being able to collect and direct characters who are mostly known to kill players in regular Minecraft. Zombies, Creepers, Skeletons and a slew of new, currently unnamed golems are all at your command. Tell them to make a massive fort and they'll build it from scratch in a flash. Direct them to rush into battle against a massive force of marauding invaders and they'll take up arms without question.

Collecting allies and building a force strong enough to defend the entire world is the big push here. It's a much larger-scale story than the simple spelunking adventures of classic Minecraft, or the four-player co-op action of Minecraft Dungeons.

Just as the Minecraft brand has essentially taken over the world of kids' games, Legends looks to spread across the land and make everything blocky and beautiful. Look for it in 2023! **— JONATHAN**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: XBOX GAME STUDIOS DEVELOPERS: MOJANG STUDIOS & BLACKBIRD INT. RELEASE: TBA 2023 RATING: RP



RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

Quadruple your fun with four players!

WAYFORWARD WASN'T QUITE ready to confirm this feature back when we had this game on our cover two issues ago, but now the cat's been let out of the bag: River City Girls 2 will indeed include four-person multiplayer!

Readers with discerning eyes might have looked at gameplay screenshots and raised an eyebrow at the suspicious spacing between the active heroes' HUDs at the top of the action, and sure enough, all that empty space was there in order to accommodate up to two extra players leaping into the fray. The first River City Girls maxed out at just two simultaneous sluggers, which was sufficient for Misako and Kyoko to be able to pound punks as a duo. But now they'll be able to have an actual double date with Riki and Kunio, with the four friends all flinging fists together! (Or they can make it a true girls' night out by inviting Marian and Provie along instead.)

Whatever combination of heroes you and your couch co-op compatriots choose to use, you'll probably need all the muscle you can muster in order to take down the newest terrors in town. As noted before, RCG1's final boss, Sabuko, is the daughter of a powerful yakuza boss — and now Daddy's back! Sabu himself will oppose our heroes with the full might of his clan . . . which includes another returning character we didn't previously know would make the cut for this sequel! His son (and Sabuko's brother) Ken is going to be making an appearance as well, returning from his origin point in River City Girls Zero. He was the one responsible for the hit-and-run accident that Kunio and Riki were falsely accused of at the beginning of that game. So the boys in particular should want to pay him back again for framing them and getting them sent to jail!

It's all shaping up to be the biggest rumble River City has ever seen. And we shouldn't have too much longer to wait for it to begin! December seems likely. **— LUCAS**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: WAYFORWARD RELEASE: TBA 2022 RATING: E10+

HARVESTELLA

A few extra insights courtesy of the Treehouse.

AS WE APPROACH the release of Harvestella, Nintendo put a spotlight (or should I say Seaslight?) on the upcoming farming sim/action RPG from Square Enix.

Harvestella takes place in a world where Seaslight crystals control the four seasons; however, when the crystals malfunction, a new season, Quietus, occurs, bringing death and destruction. That's where the story begins for players, and we got to see some snippets of it during a 30-minute Nintendo Treehouse Live presentation that focused on content from the game's second chapter — that's when our amnesiac protagonist begins a new life in Lethe Village.

The farming gameplay was shown off first, and it looks smooth and efficient. You can plant four crops at a time, and your watering tool glides seamlessly over the plants. I can't stress how cool this looks and how nice it will be for players. Sometimes planting, watering and harvesting crops in farming sims can get tedious, but I don't think that will be the case here.

The presentation also featured exploration and combat in the game's orange-tinted Higan Canyon area. While exploring, you can gather resources and are sometimes presented with choices. Should you eat this mushroom? Should you pick up the shiny crystal at your feet? There could be benefits . . . or consequences!

We got to see Harvestella's job-based combat system in action, including the hack-and-slash fighter class and the ranged mage class, where you can fire magical blasts at enemies. The combat looked fairly simple, and it's easy to change between jobs. I can see it getting deeper as you gain access to more jobs and tougher enemies.

From what we've seen so far from Harvestella, it's shaping up to be an interesting take on a farming sim, and if the story and characters provide something special, it could be a genre stand-out! **— MAGGIE**

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SQUARE ENIX RELEASE: NOVEMBER 4, 2022 RATING: T

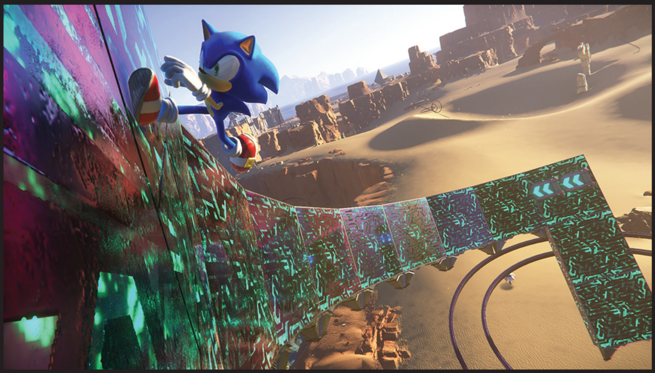
SONIC FRONTIERS

A new wide open frontier promises more freedom for Sonic than ever before.

THE JOURNEY OF Sonic Frontiers from announcement to release has been nothing if not interesting.

When it was first shown off at The Game Awards last December, details were typically sparse. Come the time E3 would normally have been in June, IGN rolled out exclusive coverage of the game, but – put simply – it failed to impress. Just look at Lucas' preview back in Issue #60 of this very publication for more on that.

But while it felt like Sonic tripped at the starting line on this one, something strange happened. As more and more people got their hands on the game, it turned out that they . . . liked it? Some more than others, but generally, even though Sega seemed bullishly intent on keeping as much of the game behind closed doors as possible – not usually a good sign – impressions have been increasingly positive.



Nintendo's The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild has been a common comparison for those who have seen both games, with the question of whether or not that style works for Sonic. But it seems that what really sets it apart is – and this should probably come as little surprise, when you stop to think about it – Sonic's speed.

As Jon Cartwright of the YouTube channel Good Vibes Gaming explained after trying the game out for about an hour at EGX, there was one boss he fought that involved knocking away segments to reach its vulnerable head. A slow-but-sure tactic, yes, but by incorporating Sonic's new use of parkour (which seems to differ from how it was utilized in Sonic Lost World) and boosting toward a wall, Sonic would run right up it, allowing him to skip the tedium and get straight to the point.

You know, just as you'd expect Sonic would do in pretty much any other form of media the Blue Blur's been a part of for the last 30+ years.

Also worth noting is that Sonic's boost (now performed with the right trigger) no longer makes him nigh-invincible, as it has in what's come to be known by fans as the "Boost Era" of games (Sonic Unleashed, Sonic Colors, Sonic Generations and Sonic Forces). Rather, it grants him a boost of speed for as long as his stamina meter holds out, much like the meter found in (say it with me, now) Breath of the Wild.

SWITCH PUBLISHER: SEGA
DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM
RELEASE: NOVEMBER 8, 2022 RATING: E10+

(Or most other open-world games, really, but let's not digress.) Stop for a moment, and it refills.

While Boost to Win may no longer be the ideal strategy it once was, Sonic still has a number of his old standbys on hand: Homing Attacks, stomps, slides, the new classic Drop Dash and more, and they'll occupy a bit more real estate on your controller than some fans might be used to, as well. Then there are the skills you can gain, such as the Cyloop maneuver (which involves running around something to send it into the air), the Loop Kick, the Spin Slash and a variety of attacks that involve sending Sonic Boom shockwaves at enemies.

This may all seem a bit daunting to a newcomer, whether to 3D Sonic games or just Sonic games in general. Fortunately, Sonic Team has seemingly elected to innovate the series here in a couple of ways to help those new to the Blue come to grips with traveling the world at Super Sonic speeds.

The first is a tutorial. Granted, that's not the most innovative thing in the world, much less in gaming, but for Sonic, this is largely untrodden ground. Cartwright says it's short and teaches you the basics, and while it's the same every time, it isn't long before you get to go out and explore the open world (at least in the demo, which reportedly only ran about 15 minutes).

The other way Sega is welcoming new players is that there are now two control styles: Action Style and High Speed Style. The former is meant to help make platforming more accurate, while the latter offers more of the speed that Sonic players have come to love over the last three decades. That said, customization goes beyond that, as TheGamer notes that players can also adjust the control layout, Sonic's speed, turning, acceleration and resistance, to name but a few things.

In addition to the more normal-scale robot enemies that Sonic is used to dealing with, there are some gargantuan "Guardian" foes that need to be taught a thing or two as well, often being compared in size and scope to the giants found in Shadow of the Colossus. Beyond even that, though, are the Titans: enemies so powerful that the Blue Blur isn't going to be able to beat them on his own. He'll have to go for the gold! You know what I'm talking about!

The Chaos Emeralds are back, now locked in Vaults spread across Kronos Island, one of the five Open Zones of the game. To access these Vaults, Sonic must collect a certain number of Vault Keys. And in order to get the Vault Keys, he'll need to tackle challenges in the game's many Cyber Space areas (small levels reminiscent of the 3D Sonic levels of the past) to earn Tokens, which can also be spent on other things. And to access *those* (there's layers to this, in case it wasn't clear), you have to solve puzzles and challenges to get Portal Gears.

So, to recap: Sonic needs to do things to collect Portal Gears to access Cyber Space areas to gather Tokens to purchase Vault Keys to collect Chaos Emeralds so that he can turn into Super Sonic and recreate that scene from the end of . . . wait, would that still count as a spoiler? In any case: whew!

Suffice it to say, the amount of stuff packed in here seems rather dense. According to IGN, director Morio Kishimoto told them back in June that the game should take the average player about 20 to 30 hours to complete – and that's not even if you're getting everything. If you're going to go for broke and *complete* this sucker, you can expect to potentially double that. (Hence the skill tree and level progression).

It's also worth noting that Sonic isn't going it solo in this brand-new wide-open world. It was strongly suspected and later confirmed that Amy Rose would be along for the ride, and the blue and pink hedgehogs will be joined by Tails the Fox and Knuckles the Echidna. All of those non-Sonic hero characters are said to be unplayable, sadly. Though maybe we can hope for some way to unlock them, or to get downloadable content in the future? After all, running around an Open Wor– er, *Zone* at Sonic speeds sounds like a blast, but can you imagine flying with Tails or gliding and climbing with Knuckles? (His abilities would make the comparison to Breath of the Wild even stronger!)

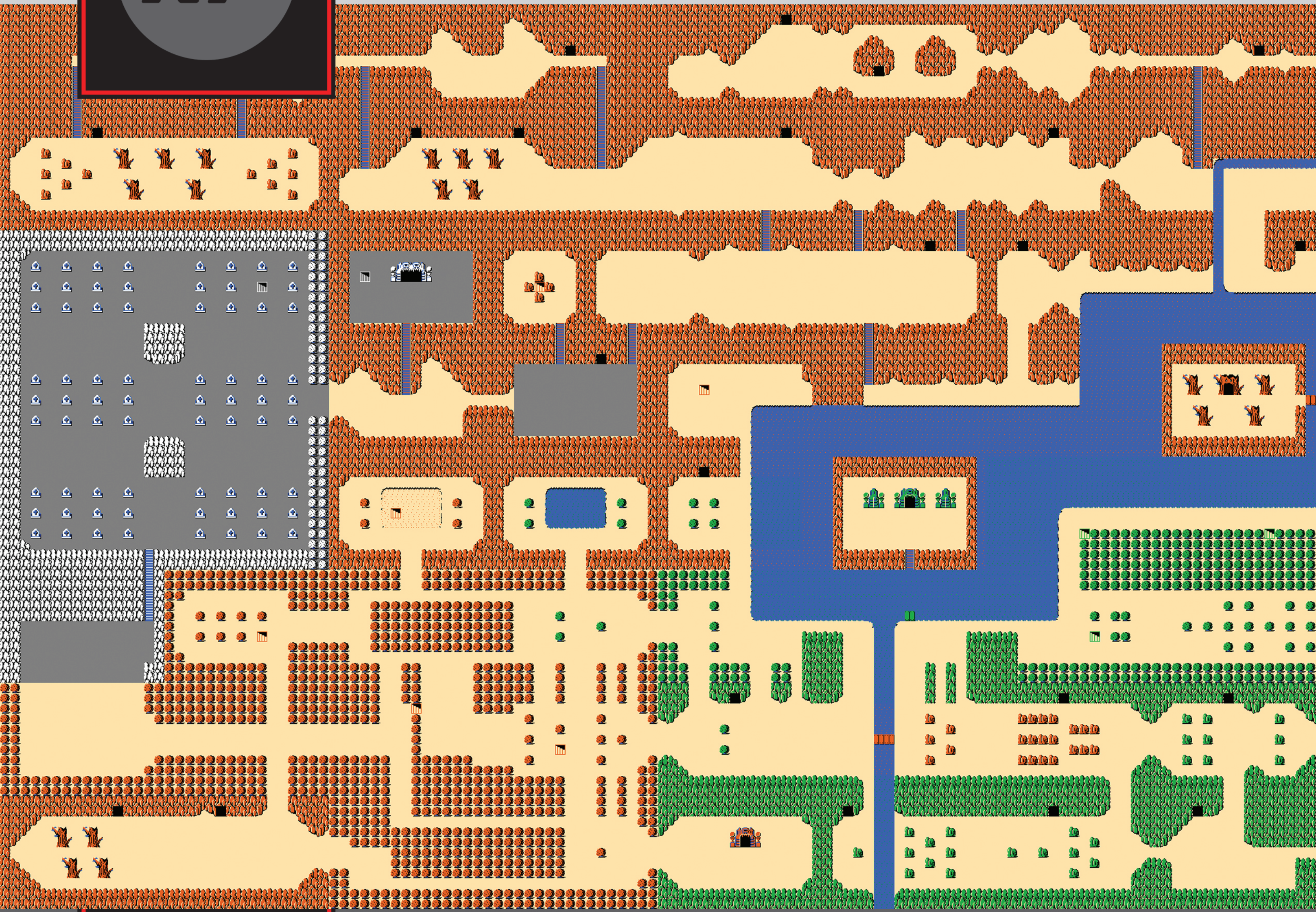
Oh, and everyone's favorite, Big the Cat, has been spotted, too! (Fingers crossed for Froggy.)

As anticipation builds for Sonic's latest adventure, the rest of us non-con-going folk don't have long to wait, as the game arrives on November 8. And those who sign up for the newsletter on the official Sonic Frontiers website before January 31, 2023, will be able to grind those mysterious sky rails in style with the custom Soap Shoes from Sonic Adventure 2! Who can resist that? **– DAVID**

BY JONATHAN HOLMES

Dr. CHOZO & SAMUS-CHAN

BY THOR THORVALDSON



THE GRAND SCALE OF NINTENDO'S ORIGINAL OPEN WORLD

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA
NES, 1987

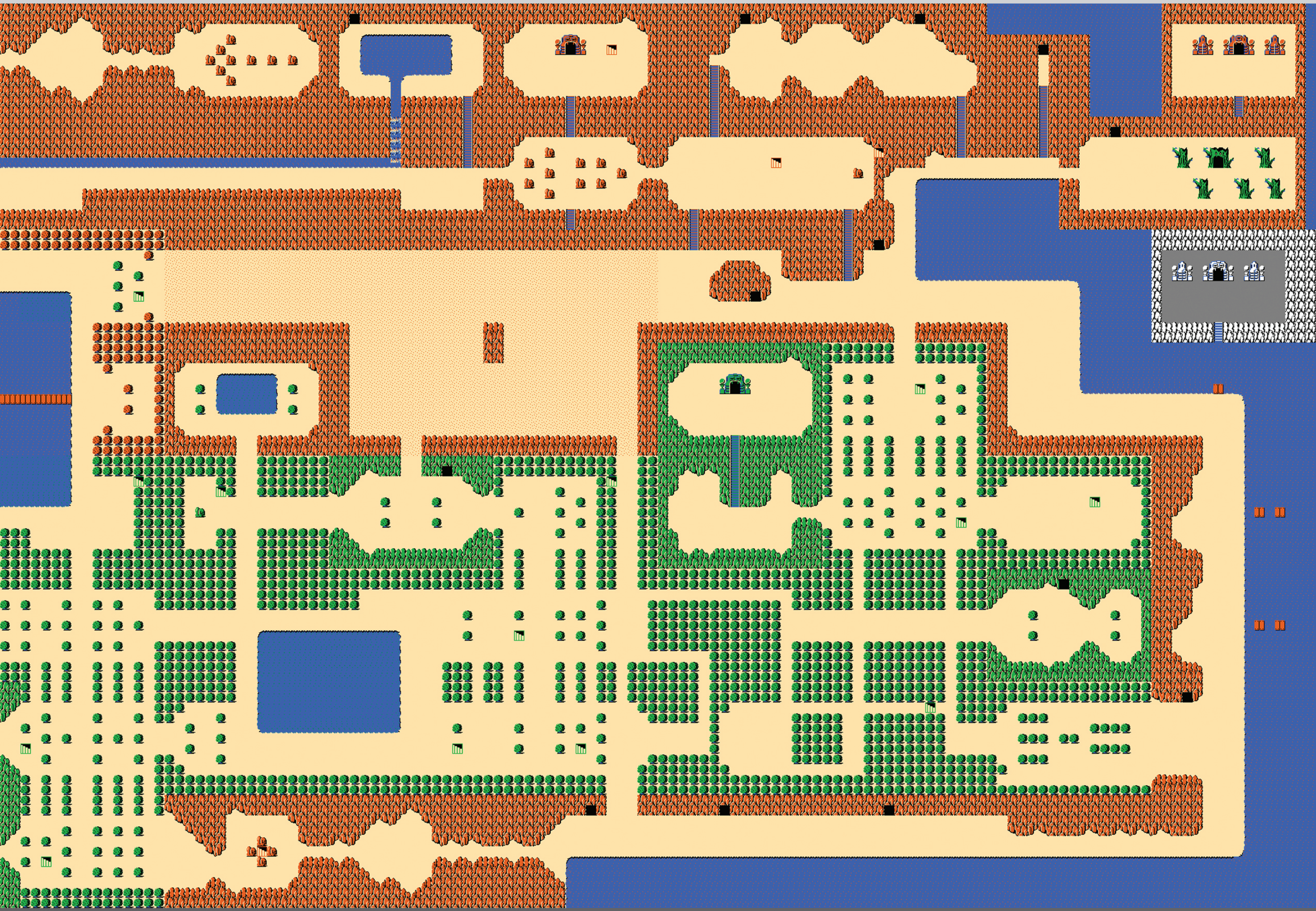
Donkey Kong had four screens. Four static, non-scrolling screens at that – the entirety of Mario's first adventure could be conveyed through just four shots of the monitor.

Mario then expanded his horizons when he began his adventures in the Mushroom Kingdom, as Super Mario Bros. had far more than just four screens – it had 32 whole sidescrolling levels' worth of sights to see! But, even still, exploration was restricted. The journey was strictly left-to-right, as players didn't even have the option to backtrack – once some part of the environment scrolled out of view, it was gone for good.

So throughout the early '80s and into the middle of that decade, Nintendo players were used to game worlds being limited. How wild must it have been to then step into the world of Hyrule!

When you first begin The Legend of Zelda, you find yourself dropped off in the middle of an empty canyon. Just standing there. There's no countdown clock motivating you to even move, either, so you're free to take a moment and simply ponder what you're seeing: a black cave entrance as the only point of interest in view, then three pathways, one apiece leading west, north and east. Four choices of where to go first.

And that's just the beginning of a continuous series of selections! The Legend of Zelda's realm of Hyrule was freedom incarnate: a go-anywhere open world that was built for exploration, and invited it at every turn. There was no set goal – nothing like a flagpole to reach. And there was no "right" way to make progress either. Every player became the author of their own story!



Nintendo, of course, was well aware that such a vast amount of freedom could have been overwhelming to the untrained gaming audience of the ’80s, so plenty of supporting materials like maps and tips & tricks resources accompanied the launch of Link’s first quest. But it was magical to ignore those things and simply go in blind, earning every moment of discovery for yourself!

To this day I still remember how awed I was as a young NES player setting out into this world for the first time. The vastness of it was unimaginable! And it was so packed with secrets – some probably have still eluded me even now, decades later.

Nintendo has crafted much larger open worlds since this first Hyrule, but I’ll always remember the magic of this original go-anywhere game. It laid an incredibly strong foundation! – **LUCAS**

IT'S NEW TO ME!
MINECRAFT

A father and son find common ground in a blocky world.

FATHERHOOD IS A full-time job, and for some people, so is playing Minecraft. I've known that was true for a while, but when my 7-year-old son discovered the wide world of Minecraft YouTubers a few months back, it really hit home. He watches these guys every day now, and the fact that many of them are millionaires still blows my mind.

The irony is, up until recently, I avoided Minecraft because it felt like a real-life waste of time. I first played it back in 2010 when it was just a weird little indie game only super nerds knew about. As someone who mostly played games to understand the people who made them, it felt very empty. Nothing about it said much of anything – it was just a big open world where you could make stuff if you wanted to. I already lived in a world like that! And there was plenty of stuff I was trying to make (like the magazine you're reading right now).

That all changed earlier this year thanks to my son Ryan, who had barely played Minecraft either, but literally never stopped talking about it. He made Minecraft cities out of LEGOs, wore Minecraft clothes, watched Minecraft on TV and begged to have a Minecraft-themed birthday party. To mark the day, I busted out the old Wii U and the Minecraft disc I had bought on sale back in 2015 because it was too cheap to pass up. (Sometimes it pays to be a video game hoarder.)

This was how Minecraft went from being an unplayed game on my shelf to a place where I could bond with my son. We shared in the amazement together as he taught me how to make an Iron Golem out of four blocks of iron and a pumpkin, and when I took over for him when it was time to dig into the deep, deep caves for precious diamonds among the mobs of monsters and lavafalls.

Working together, we learned the importance of using a map to find your house (there's no point in collecting things if you can't find your collection later), taking care of your pet wolves (losing one down a cave made us both almost cry) and getting enough sleep (or else the Phantoms will haunt you). These types of tasks felt like bland busywork when playing alone over a decade ago, but with my kid they felt important – and, dare I say it, exciting.

I also used Minecraft as a way to teach Ryan about many of the things that influenced its development, most of which I've enjoyed for years. He was fascinated to hear that the name was a riff on a classic PC game called StarCraft, and that the Iron Golems were inspired by the giant, peaceful robots in Castle in the Sky, a fantastic anime movie from 1986.

Explaining some of those influences, like Night of the Living Dead (the first story about flesh-eating zombies spawning at night and spreading their disease to unsuspecting villagers) took a lot of child-friendly filtering to get through without giving him nightmares, but that only made it more enjoyable. Seeing Minecraft through the eyes of a child is the best way to appreciate it, for sure.

In that way, Minecraft does say a lot about Notch and the original development team. Like children, they wanted to be in a reality where they could be left alone to play. No need to work a job, or even talk to anyone, to make something you're proud of. An endless camping trip where the rules are consistent, and everything can fit together. For me, it's a sandbox that's only fun when I can play in it with my kid, and I'm going to enjoy that fun while it lasts. (Most likely until he becomes a teenager and gets too angsty for Dad time.)
– JONATHAN

ORIGINAL RELEASE: PC, MAY 2009 (FIRST PUBLIC VERSION); NOVEMBER 2011 (FULL RELEASE) PUBLISHER/ DEVELOPER: MOJANG

NINTENDO SYSTEM DEBUT: Wii U, DECEMBER 17, 2015 (ESHOP); JUNE 17, 2016 (RETAIL) PUBLISHER: MOJANG DEVELOPERS: 4J STUDIOS & MICROSOFT

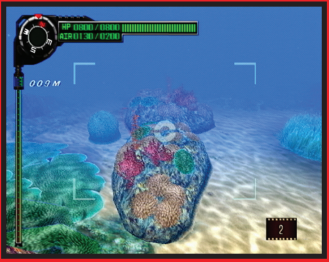
Wii U VS. SWITCH

Some might say that by introducing my son to Minecraft through the old-fashioned 2015 Wii U port, instead of the more up-to-date Switch version, I'm committing an act of bad parenting. But that's actually the way he wants it! He loves the Wii U and its big comfy GamePad, the welcoming Miis on the opening dashboard and the generally sturdy feel of the console. Every day we play he asks me, "Why did people like the Switch more than this?!" And all I can tell him is, "They didn't know how good they had it." And don't go thinking he's the one who doesn't know any better! We actually did play the Switch version for a night or two after my 16-year-old cousin gave us his copy, but our leap to current-gen was short-lived. Ryan couldn't stand seeing the in-game store that sells stuff like SpongeBob skins ("I don't want to spend real money on pretend things!") and he was terrified of new mobs like The Warden ("The music makes me want to hide forever!"). Returning to the Wii U version from there felt like a wholesome homecoming by comparison.

ORIGINAL RELEASE: Wii, JANUARY 21, 2008 PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ARIKA

PLAYING IT TODAY

Endless Ocean launched at a budget price of $29.99 back in the Wii era, so it was probably picked up by quite a few players as an impulse purchase. That's contributed to a good supply of used copies being in circulation in secondhand stores, eBay and the like – I was able to grab a complete-in-box copy for around $10 for this article. Note, though, that one piece of the game is unfortunately inaccessible these days: the two-player online mode. Back in 2008, you could link up with a friend through the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection and go diving together! Nowadays, Endless Ocean offers nothing but a solo swimming experience.



EVERBLUE ORIGINS

Did you know that Endless Ocean is actually the third installment in a whole scuba-diving series? Not officially – Nintendo owns the Endless Ocean IP and didn't link this game to any predecessors – but they do exist! Years before the development team at Arika crafted this game for the Wii, they made a diving game called Everblue for the PlayStation 2. It never came to America, but it did have a release in Europe in 2002 after its 2001 debut in Japan. It reviewed really poorly! Critics in Europe blasted it with "3 out of 10" scores. Japan's fans were more kind, though, so Arika tried again with Everblue 2, also for PS2. It actually did make it to America, and it was received a little better – but still didn't light the world on fire. (Its Metacritic average sits at 59/100). What does all that mean? Well, Nintendo really must've been able to see untapped potential in this dev team. And they delivered a winner at last!

IT'S NEW TO ME! ENDLESS OCEAN

Diving into an experience dedicated to underwater exploration.

I'VE BEEN REPEATEDLY vocal about my love of video games that emphasize exploration in these pages in the past, but in this issue celebrating open worlds I must admit to a missing piece of my exploring experience: I never did play Endless Ocean. I've owned a copy for years! It's been sitting on my shelf, collecting dust, just waiting for me to finally open up its case.

Well, I finally did . . . and I found that there wasn't a copy of Endless Ocean inside, but rather its sequel, Endless Ocean: Blue World! (The used game store made a mistake years ago, it seems.) But a quick trip online to eBay rectified that oversight, and I dove into the original at long last.

Endless Ocean is exploration incarnate. It's almost entirely dedicated to just letting you dive underwater and swim around at your leisure, making discoveries at your own pace. It's aggressively nonaggressive.

It's so laid-back that in its intro sequence your hero character – a diver who's just been hired by a marine biologist – is told directly by that marine biologist that you actually don't have to do any work if you don't want to. "I would never survive if I had to work in an office," she says. She's all about the lazy ocean life, living adrift on her research boat and letting the wind carry her wherever it will.

. . . But she can't swim. So that's where you come in! You'll get research tasks like finding specific species of fish and examining them, and you can choose to do them. Or not! There are no consequences for inactivity.

The lack of tension continues below the surface as well, as in the world of Endless Ocean, you can never be harmed. You can swim right up to a shark. You can reach out and touch a giant squid. You can pet an electric eel! It doesn't matter! You can't be hurt. You're the world's only invincible diver.

I like that . . . and I don't. On the one hand, it's nice that the core of the experience – pure exploration – is never interrupted by, say, needing to desperately swim for your life to avoid being eaten by a great white. But it also messes up the sense of immersion too, because it's weird for this slow-moving human diver in a neon-bright wetsuit to just swim up and pet the nose of a goblin shark and have there be no reaction from the animal whatsoever.

Petting fish is literally what you do, too. You use the motion controls of the Wii Remote to smoothly swim around underwater, pointing a cursor left, right, up or down to move in those directions. But when you get close to a creature, the cursor changes function and becomes an extension of your diver's hand. You can poke a fish by tapping A, or combine an A press with a waggle of the Wiimote to pet it. It works, I guess? But again, it's immersion-breaking in the sense that it would be almost impossible to just swim up to and touch any lone fish in the sea in real life – and even if you could, it wouldn't be wise to.

Taking photos of the fish makes more sense, and luckily you unlock a camera function that allows for that. Beyond that and occasionally finding a buried treasure in the sea floor, though, it's all about the swimming. "Just keep swimming! Just keep swimming!"

I enjoyed diving into Endless Ocean, but it doesn't quite live up to its name, since it sadly throws invisible walls up to block your progress if you ever try to stray too far away from your boat. The Wii hardware did an admirable job on the visuals at the time, but it just didn't have the power to be able to load the entire sea seamlessly. Now that nearly 15 years have passed since its launch, though, technology has come a lot further. Could Nintendo revisit this series with a more modern sequel? They did apply for a new trademark of the Endless Ocean name in Japan a few years ago . . . so it's possible! And if it doesn't happen? Well, I've got a copy of Blue World that I still need to play. **– LUCAS**

WARP ZONE

What Nintendo Power was writing about way back when.

THE 102ND ISSUE of Nintendo Power kicked off the 1997 video game holiday season with . . . NFL Quarterback Club '98? Really? Huh. Not that there's anything wrong with that; you just don't see many sports games take the NP cover. Maybe ostensibly being the first Nintendo 64 game with high resolution (for the time) graphics and an exclusive NFL license on the console had something to do with it? Or maybe it was part of the push for the new "Nintendo Sports" label, which occupied the back cover.

But while it got the cover to itself, the inside feature was a different story, as it shared page space with Madden 64 while the NP crew of the day tried to determine which would be the better title to sit down with after a hearty Thanksgiving meal (presumably). In the end, they went 5-3 in favor of Quarterback Club, but said it's up to individual choice as to which sounds better to the Power Player in question.

Beyond football, there was an apparent love of racing this month as San Francisco Rush, Top Gear Rally and Diddy Kong Racing were heavily featured, with the latter sharing poster space with moves and combos from ClayFighter 63 1/3. Hudson's Dual Heroes brought another fighting game to the platform, and N64 owners could finally hail to the king as Duke Nukem 64 arrived.

Elsewhere, a feature on Konami promised a potentially bright future with such titles as Dracula 3D (née Castlevania 64), Hybrid Heaven, G.A.S.P.!, Nagano Winter Olympics '98 and NBA In the Zone '98. As you might have guessed, not all of those made quite the splash Konami and Nintendo had hoped. (Say, what are Alucard and Snake up to?)

In a strange twist, there was also Kirby's Dream Land 3 . . . on the Super NES? That's right, for some strange reason, the Game Boy series made the jump to the 16-bit platform, and was even the last first-party title published by Nintendo on the platform in North America. Meanwhile, Donkey Kong Land III, a companion game for Donkey Kong Country 3, would be the lone Game Boy offering this month.

The Player's Poll grand prize winner this month received a VIP trip to the Formula 1 1998 Canadian Grand Prix in Montreal, courtesy of NP, F1 Pole Position 64 (which they also won) and "Ubi Soft" (as they were once known). Pak Watch rounded things out with looks at Automobili Lamborghini, Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub-Zero, James Bond 007 for Game Boy and a peek at the Tokyo Game Show.

The next month's issue celebrated holiday cheer with a Diddy Kong Racing cover, featuring the simian sidekick taking on Wizpig in a race through a winter wonderland. Alongside course maps and strategies inside, N64 fans were treated to Wayne Gretzky's 3D Hockey '98, Chameleon Twist, Wheel of Fortune, Bomberman 64 and more of Automobili Lamborghini and MK Mythologies: Sub-Zero (which, frozen or not, wasn't much of a treat).

On the other hand, the *real* treat for Fun Machine aficionados was a feature containing the first 100 screenshots of Zelda 64, which you may know better as The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time! What's more, some of the story is presented within the pages of this feature, but it differs wildly from the one fans have come to know and love in the decades since. (Check it out below, reprinted from the original issue!) While you can see some of the final version peeking through, it's nevertheless an interesting flip of the script. If you seek out the issue and look over the screens, you'll notice several differences in Link's design, too!

While one side of this issue's poster was filled with MK Mythologies tips and strategies (that can only do so much in a game like that), the other side rode the fire of the Monday Night War going on between the then-WWF and WCW, with WCW vs. nWo: World Tour not only ready to go on your wall, but send you to WCW Bash at the Beach if you won this month's Player's Poll contest. The winner not only got to meet some of the wrestlers at a pre-event party, but a copy of the game as well!

Sorry, I must have gotten my issues mixed up . . . oh, wait, no . . . Donkey Kong Land III is just the only Game Boy game being featured this month. Again. (Game Boy was in serious decline for a while before Pokémon Red & Blue revived it in '98!)

Wrapping things up, Pak Watch featured Turok (for Game Boy, actually), Forsaken, Snowboard Kids, WWF: Raw is War and, curiously, an exclusive focus on Boss Game Studios. **— DAVID**

ISSUE #102: **NOVEMBER 1997**

ISSUE #103: **DECEMBER 1997**

Link Comes of Age

The outline of the story for Zelda 64 comes straight from EAD, the chief game development department at Nintendo Company Ltd. in Kyoto, Japan. Although EAD considers everything "tentative" until the final version of a game is completed, much of what you read here will be a part of Mr. Miyamoto's greatest epic. Long ago, before Gannon stole the Triforce and kidnapped Zelda, Link set out to his coming-of-age ceremony in the Maze Woods. It was the custom of his tribe, the Kokiri family, that a young man would receive a guardian spirit or fairy who would stay beside him and guide him throughout his life. But as Link walked through the woods, he discovered that a monster had captured one such fairy. Gallantly, Link came to the rescue and defeated the monster, but the fairy was mortally wounded. In her dying breath, she warned Link not to allow Gannondorf to possess the Triforce and to seek out a wise man and his spiritual stone. At the same time, Gannondorf, the king of the thieves, was searching for the legendary Triforce so that he could steal its power. In time, Gannondorf stumbled into the Maze Woods and neared the secret place where the Triforce was kept. Link went to Hyrule Castle for help. Princess Zelda knew of the Triforce's hiding place, but to reach it they would have to find three magical stones to unlock the secret. Thus begins the adventure.

DATE OF BIRTH
October 30, 1980

FAVORITE SODA
Moxie, Maine Root Blueberry, Coke Classic, OK Soda . . .

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
I have worked as a professional magician and canoe salesman, and I had a pet duck named Kintaro.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
Making silly things that are also hopefully nice and fun.

BEST KNOWN FOR
Soda Drinker Pro, Retired Men's Nude Beach Volleyball League, Find the Letter H, Rotgut, Deep Learning with Merrill Grambell, My Girl: The Movie: The Video Game

DATE OF BIRTH
January 18, 2005

FAVORITE SODA
Mountain Dew

LITTLE-KNOWN FACTS
My friends and I have the most-subscribed channel on **Tracle.tv**. I'm also making a re-creation of the Wii Shop Channel at **wiishopchannel.neocities.org**.

CURRENT POSITION IN THE INDUSTRY
First-time game developer!

BEST KNOWN FOR
My YouTube videos on **YouTube.com/NathanBoehm** and the Soda Drinker Pro NES port I'm working on with Will.

WILL BRIERLY & NATHAN BOEHM

A carbonated conversation with the developers of video gaming's biggest soda drinking celebration!

INTERVIEW BY JONATHAN HOLMES

NF: What were some of the games that inspired you to become a developer?
WILL: The first ones that come to mind are Loom, because I loved the look and story (and I love weaving and looms); King's Quest IV, because I liked the puzzles and story; Phantasy Star, since I loved the characters and how huge the world felt; Milon's Secret Castle, because of how mysterious it felt; and BurgerTime, because it's still one of the most satisfying games ever, even though I can rarely get past Level 3. One other important one to mention isn't a game, but for Christmas one year I got Deluxe Paint Animation for PC. That was absolutely one of the most influential things for me ever. My brother and I would constantly be making silly animations for all sorts of things, so an infinite thank you to Mom and Dad for that gift.
NATHAN: For me it's games like Undertale, Portal 2 and Soda Drinker Pro, obviously! *(laughs)*

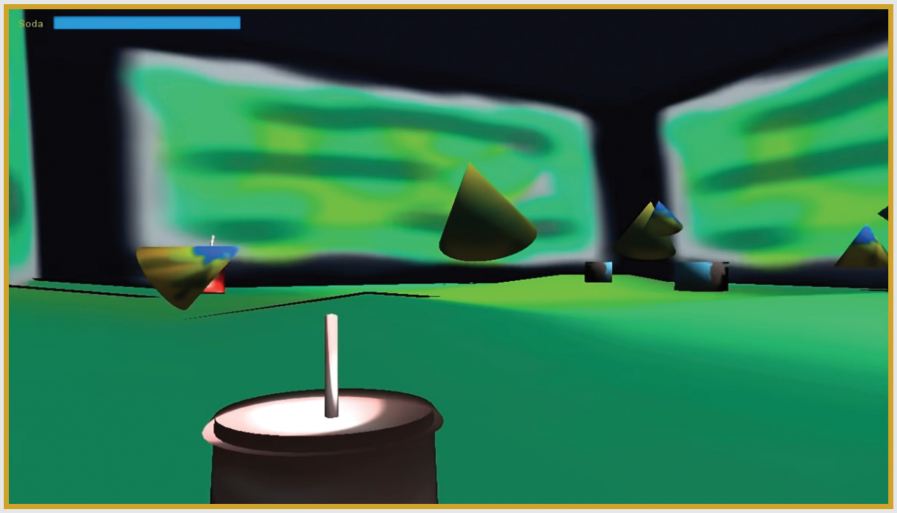
What was the first game you ever made, and what was it like to make it?
WILL: My first game (that was never finished) was one called Crocodile Prosthodontist. It didn't get far into development at all – it was more just for fun. The first commercially released game was a game in actual arcades called "Get Outta My Face." It had a very small release and wasn't commercially successful, but it was an incredible learning experience. I had to work on everything from manufacturing, electronics, shipping and of course making the game to dealing with organized crime folks trying to get me to pay for "protection" of my machines so they didn't get vandalized at locations where they also had various vending machines. As challenging and financially unsuccessful as it was, it taught me so much and opened up doors I would have never expected in other areas of life.
NATHAN: I don't really have an easy answer to this! I've been making little things for my own enjoyment for years, but Soda Drinker Pro for NES is the first game I've actually put effort into.

Will, the original Soda Drinker Pro was something you worked on for years before its launch in 2016, and it also contains a much bigger game inside it called Vivian Clark. What made you want to hide a massive, potentially very marketable game inside of a less-big game that's only about drinking soda?
WILL: I love surprises and nice secrets and I also always love the idea of trying something very risky artistically and commercially. For example, I've always wished that TV shows would make secret unreleased episodes of a series and just leak them years later and never explain anything about them. Even in high school my friend and I would make flyers for an organization that didn't exist (but sounded cool) and pass them out at large events. There was nothing about how to contact the organization, no website or email or anything, and when people asked us about it we would not say much. Just something silly and mysterious. I love stuff like that.

What was it like to like to see Soda Drinker Pro launch, and what factors do you think led it to find the audience it has now?
WILL: The whole thing has been an incredible honor. I remember seeing Xbox tweet about it and how wild it felt, and when we had the launch party at the beautiful Microsoft Nerd Center in Cambridge, that was amazing! That night was extra special because the initial demo I built of Vivian Clark was built at a hackathon

WHAT IS SODA DRINKER PRO?

Have you ever driven a joke so far into the ground that it stops being funny? That's when cowards give up! The truly brave souls among us will instead drive that tired, broken joke even further into the unfunny dirt until it pokes out of the other side of the Earth, more hilarious than ever. That's the story of Soda Drinker Pro. It started off as a goof on how games have become serious junk food in modern culture – products that most treat as a lighthearted vice, while others in niche subcultures look upon them with professional levels of importance. An open world exploration game, Soda Drinker Pro plops you into one of 102 different levels, like an Avant Garde art museum, a wrestling match, and even a butt. It also contains a bonus game called Vivian Clark, which is much, much bigger than Soda Drinker Pro, and allows you to control over 80 different characters in just as many surprising, dreamlike scenarios. The game initially struggled to find its audience, but after big name streamers like Dunkey and Jacksepticeye started playing it, it really popped off. Pro gamers loving a game about Pro Soda Drinking? What could be better?



that was in that very same building. Everyone at the hackathon was all making serious startups and I went off by myself to make a video game. (I didn't know that game jams existed at the time, so I was a little out of place at the hackathon being the only one making a game.) My game made it to the finals of the event, but didn't win. But years later it was so surreal to see that same big room filled with people there just to see our game!

Nathan, when did you first discover Soda Drinker Pro, and what made you want to remake it for the NES?
I'm not sure exactly when I first found out about Soda Drinker Pro, but I know I bought it on October 9, 2018, after watching videogamedunkey's "Steam Winner's Collection" video. The idea was so simple that from then on, instead of making a "Hello, world" program (a type of program that's often the first thing a developer learns to code), I would work on something Soda Drinker Pro-related. I even started on my own version of the game for Nintendo Labo, complete with cardboard, soda-shaped Joy-Con holders and the sound effect of drinking soda when you angled them like they were being poured!

For Christmas 2020, my parents gifted me a copy of NESMaker, which lets you make NES games. I decided, as a test, I would make a few levels of Soda Drinker Pro. And the rest is history!

How did it feel when you first heard from Will that he wanted to work with you on making your Soda Drinker Pro "demake" into an official collaboration?
NATHAN: When I decided to continue working on the project after the first 10 levels, I reached out to Will to ask permission to sell the game, since it was their IP. The original plan was for me to just handmake the cartridges and sell them on eBay. When he responded, it felt amazing finally being able to talk directly to such an inspiration of mine! Not only that, but when he suggested we talk to a publisher, I was amazed. I never thought the game would be good enough to get published, and I hadn't even considered the possibility until then.

What do you think it is about the open world of soda drinking that translates to the NES so well? If Limited Run wants to publish it, it must be pretty hot stuff!
NATHAN: I think it's the fact that it's so simple. You really only need to be able to walk around, collect Bonus Sodas and drink soda. I think that lets the game translate pretty well to not just the NES, but pretty much any console you can think of! To this day, I have no idea why Limited Run decided to pick this game up, but if they think it's good, I must be doing something right!

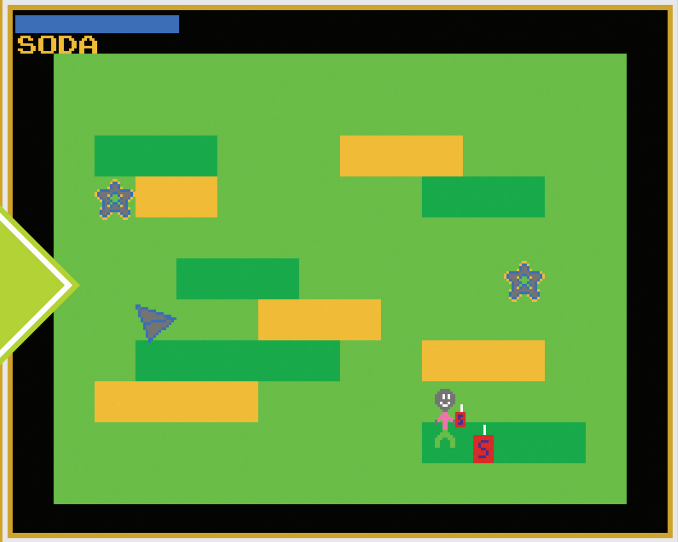
Will, you've done interactive theater projects with dancer and actor Mikhail Baryshnikov, virtual dance parties with Webster's Emmanuel Lewis, have a secret project with the bass player for Aerosmith and co-founded a company with Darryl McDaniels from Run DMC. What do you think it is about you, one of the wackiest game developers in the world, that's led so many celebrities to trust you with a collaboration?
WILL: It's hard to say! I think something all these folks have in common is they want to try new things, and they want to take art and entertainment to places it's never been, and that's absolutely what I'm into. As for how they found me, it's all been a set of random circumstances where we met – but when we do, we click and have similar goals artistically. It's an incredible honor to be able to work with all sorts of wonderful people.

Nathan, you're just getting started with your career in game development. What are some of the best and worst outcomes you can imagine for your long-term plans for making games?
NATHAN: Best case scenario, a game company sees this game and is impressed by how I managed to get my first game published at such a young age. Worst case scenario, I'm seen as the guy who made that stupid, boring, overpriced NES game. I'm not sure which is more likely.

With this project, you've both worked to create something new that will forever be tied to a part of gaming history. What wide open spaces would you like to see the ever-blossoming Soda Drinker franchise expanding to explore from this point forward?
WILL: I would love to see a Soda Drinker Pro cereal, a Lifetime original movie, or maybe a Broadway musical based on the game.
NATHAN: I hope to one day see Soda Drinker Pro on every console known to man. I've done nothing to act on this dream yet, but I'd love to see it happen.

If you had an unlimited budget and total creative freedom to work on any Nintendo franchise, which would you choose and what would you do with it? (Maybe a spin-off of the Punch-Out!! series chronicling the rise of Soda Popinski to superstar status in the soda-drinking world?)
WILL: I think I would probably make a first-person version of Kid Icarus that somehow captured the vibe of the graphics of the original mixed with elements of Golden Axe arcade, a Caravaggio painting and Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts for SNES, but still in the world of Kid Icarus. It would look super realistic and be kind of scary but would also have the Eggplant Wizard because that character is neat.
NATHAN: I'd probably make a Zelda Maker. Like Mario Maker, but you can make Zelda games. I think the possibilities for a game like that would be endless, and I'd love to see what people would make.

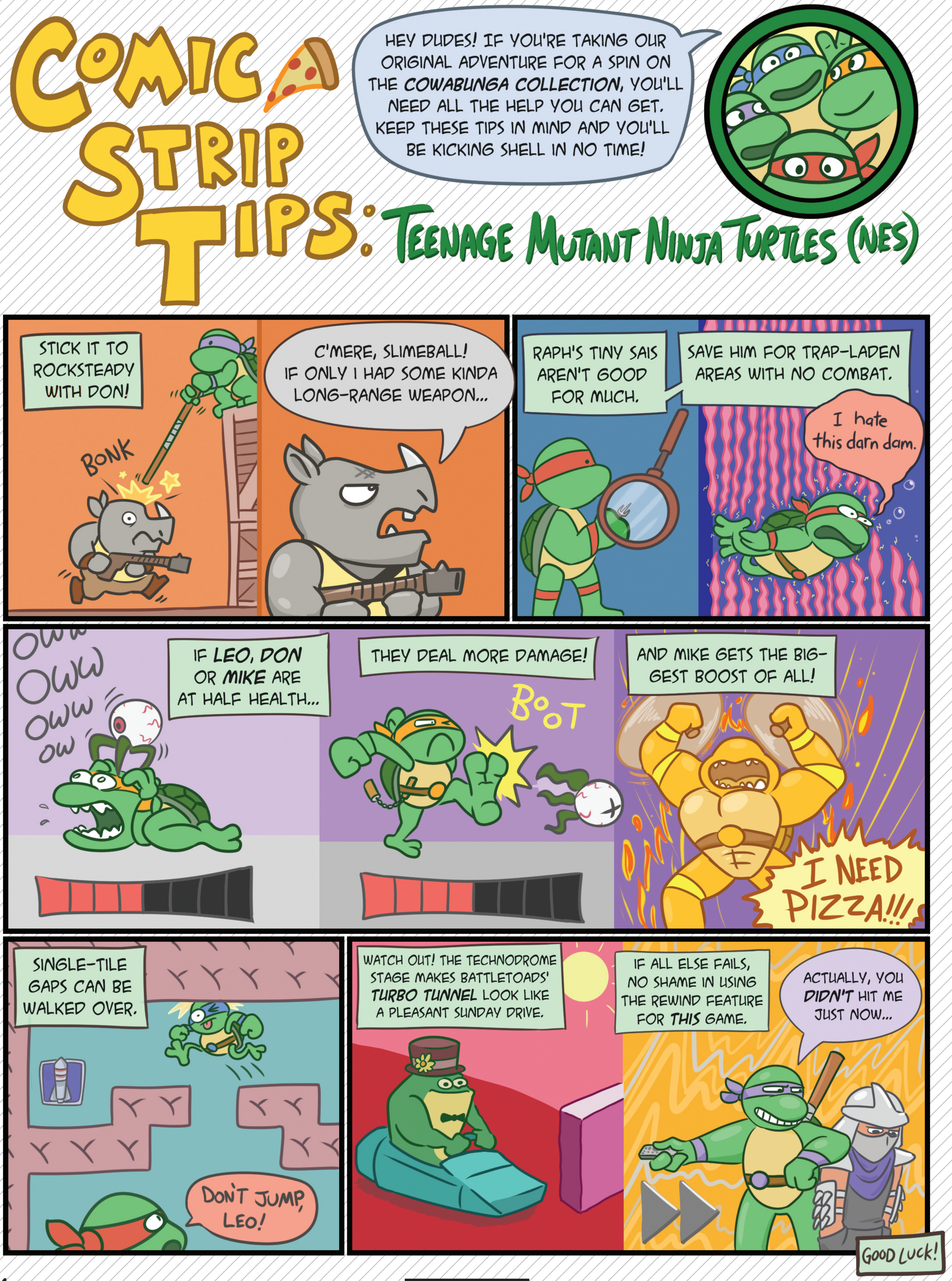
Finally, if you could have any super power, what would it be, and why?
NATHAN: I'd choose the ability to freeze time, assuming I wouldn't age, and I could still move stuff around without consequence. I could get a lot done and have a lot of time to myself. Not to mention it'd be a great party trick and/or perfect crime.
WILL: I would have a special beam that when it's shined on people helps them feel good about themselves and everyone around them. It would make it impossible for people to hate each other. Instead, people would feel connected and care about each other. From there I would have the beam sent into space and pointed at Earth so it could cover the world.



CONVERTING A 3D OPEN WORLD INTO A 2D NES ADVENTURE

It's not uncommon to see classic 2D NES games get modern remakes for current consoles, usually with free roaming gameplay and fully polygonal graphics. But how would one take a current-gen game with wantonly weird open worlds and intentionally unimpressive visuals, then take it backward to the 8-bit era? When it comes to Soda Drinker Pro, the trick is always to commit to the bit. This new demake, soon to be released on real NES cartridges via Limited Run Games, is no different. Explaining a joke is the best way to kill it, so let's see if it can withstand a little analysis from us and still survive! The reason the game is so funny? Pure, unearned self-confidence, the same kind you might find in a multi-million-dollar marquee title. Just as AAA marketing mouthpieces might hit the show floor at E3 to brag about the technical muscle behind their latest big game, Soda Drinker Pro brags of being the most advanced soda drinking simulation on the planet. Likewise, the demake's comedy is derived from how it loyally recreates every life-altering, jaw-dropping screen of the 3D original. The future is now, and it's made from a few kilobytes of digital cola!

Comic Strip Tips: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (NES)



BY MATTHEW TARANTO

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 offers a wider world to explore than ever before, but our expedition is now complete! Flip the page for the conclusion of our review!

REVIEW CONTINUED FROM ISSUE #61

There's Just So Much to See!

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

LIFE, AND HOW it's valued, has been a recurring theme in the Xenoblade Chronicles series.

The first game told a tale of conflict between organic and mechanical life, and how the powers that be used that situation to benefit themselves.

In the second game, we had Drivers and Blades, who share a special link. Blades are nearly immortal, but lose their memories when their Driver dies, leading to different life philosophies.

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 features the world of Aionios and its warring nations: Keves and Agnus. In Aionios, people only live 10 years, and most don't make it that long because of constant battle. People focus their short lifespans on winning fights and not much else.

Out of the three, XC3 delivers the series' best interpretation of this theme, as we see what happens when a group of characters' beliefs about life are shaken to their core.

Throughout the story, the cast of six (Noah, Mio, Lanz, Sena, Eunie and Taion) discover that there's more to life than endless fighting, and they are forever changed. Seeing these moments play out, where they learn about family, love, regret and heart-break, makes for an incredibly emo-tional and compelling tale I won't soon forget.

This is one of many instances in which XC3 takes elements from previous Xenoblade games and provides the most impressive version of them. In addition to its story and themes, the setting, characters, combat system, music and design are all the best this series has to offer.

XC3's setting is Monolith Soft's most ambitious yet, and it pays off. For the most part, it looks great on Switch, and I encountered few performance issues. Aionios is massive: larger than

the open worlds of XC and XC2. It's filled to the brim with activities, and all areas are enhanced by the game's impressive soundtrack, which spans upbeat tunes, dramatic dirges and emotional vocal tracks.

You can explore stunning locales, discover hidden quests, fight a myriad of creatures, gather materials for quests and crafting and, most notably, learn more about the history and society of Aionios.

XC3's main narrative gives just a glimpse into what life in Aionios is like, but you'll gain more understanding if you go off the beaten path into the game's open world. It's used as a major storytelling device. As you explore, you'll find colonies of people who handle the constant fighting and short lifespans differently.

For example, one colony thrives on fighting and the heat of battle, while another developed a lucrative system of accruing supplies to keep itself afloat. The more I explored Aionios, the more I came to understand it and care about its inhabitants. It made the time I spent exploring feel valuable. Not every open world game has that effect on players, and that speaks to the overall high quality Monolith was able to deliver.

That quality can also be found in XC3's action combat system, which includes auto attacks and special abilities called Arts. I was worried early on when I saw that combat featured six playable characters and the packed interface on the screen, but once I gave myself time to get used to it, it became so much fun!

The system gives an incredible amount of flexibility to players. Each main party member starts out as a specific class, but they can take on new ones as you play. You gain access to new classes via Hero Quests, which feature great side stories, too.

Beyond changing up your party's classes, you can customize each member's Arts and Fusion Arts, a new offering in XC3. Fusion Arts are a combination of two Arts from different classes, and when activated, they produce the effects of both at the same time.

The customization was a bit much at times, as you also have to manage skills, accessories and gems for six characters. I think some of these aspects could've been trimmed down or left out altogether.

Chain Attacks return from past games, but work a bit differently in XC3 — and somehow Monolith Soft was able to make them more over-the-top than before! When activated, they pause time in battle and have their own catchy music track. During a Chain Attack, party members use their Fusion Arts to fill the Chain Gauge and activate a Chain Order. Each party member has their own Chain Order with different effects. They can easily turn the tide in battle if you're in a tough spot, allowing you to rack up thousands, or even a few million points of damage.

And then there are the Ouroboros forms. Within the six party members, three pairs (Noah & Mio, Lanz & Sena and Eunie & Taion) can fuse together to become Ouroboros: large armored forms that wield powerful Arts. You can use them for a limited time, but activating them at the right time could mean the difference between winning and losing. (And they look really cool.)

While there's no shortage of mechanics and activities to engross players, XC3 is grounded by the excellently written cast and the heartfelt moments they share. At first, they see each other as enemies — but once fate forces them to work together, they grow closer. My favorite parts of the game showcased these bonds and how they developed. It was conveyed so naturally! Individually, each character also stands out. I related to each one on a personal level. Sena struggles to be herself; Noah can't reconcile his morals with his obligations. Their struggles and journeys make the story pack an even greater punch.

I began XC3 knowing I'd enjoy it because of the fun I had with the previous games. What I didn't expect was for this to become one of my favorite JPRGs of all-time! With its engaging open world, engrossing combat system, loveable characters and gripping story, this game is a masterpiece of the genre! **— MAGGIE**

10

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH SOFT
RATING: T

An Entire Era of Classic Turtles Action!

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE COWABUNGA COLLECTION

SOME CRIED OUT for it. Others said it wasn't possible.

Whether Konami had to move mountains and make the impossible possible, or things simply aren't what we think, the end result is undeniable: A complete collection of all the major arcade, console and handheld Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles games from the era that defined them is here!

These games are no cheap cash grabs, like so many other licensed titles would come to be known as over the years. The TMNT burst onto the scene at the same time as the original Nintendo Entertainment System was taking the country by storm, and the two would become so entwined that it was not the least bit unreasonable for Leonardo, Michelangelo, Donatello and Raphael to appear on the same magazine covers as Mario, Sonic or Mega Man.

13 is often considered an unlucky number, and while one could point to this as the number of games they managed to get out before their star began to fade as proof, it's nevertheless a lucky number for fans of the green teens, as that's how many titles are packed into Konami's biggest collection to date. Two arcade hits, four NES classics, two 16-bit smashes each for Super NES and Genesis and three overlooked and underrated Game Boy titles comprise this package. (But if that whole "13" thing bothers you, then know that the Japanese versions are here where applicable, too.)

Some people have pointed to the recently released and well-received Shredder's Revenge as a reason to pass on this pizza-powered package, figuring that its more modern beat-'em-up amenities render these offerings obsolete, but they're missing the bigger picture. While beat-'em-ups are generally known to be the bread and butter of TMNT video games, the truth is that the genre only accounts for less than half of what's on offer here. In addition to some of the best brawlers to ever hit your TV screen, you've also got platformers. You've got one-on-one fighting games. And you even have a full-blown Metroidvania in Radical Rescue! So if you're a TMNT fan who's all brawled out, worry not: You've got other options here.

You've got a lot more to occupy your time with here, too. In theory, you could start up this collection and never even touch any of the games during a play session, as it's packed with other content! Box art, manuals, flyers, magazine ads, comic book covers, screencaps from every animated TMNT show and enough developer notes to, well, make a video game. And they're all searchable with an incredibly robust search engine, too.

Some of these older games could be a bit rough, though, and thanks to personalities such as the Angry Video Game Nerd bringing an undue amount of infamy to some games such as the original NES Turtles title, some people may feel deterred. Fortunately, the fine folks at Digital Eclipse have your back! The save states and rewind features common to so many collections these days are just the start, as they've included a retro Nintendo Power-style strategy guide for all the games, menus with various options to fine-tune the experience and even perfect video runs of each game that allow you to jump into the action seamlessly at any time.

If there's one area where this collection seems to falter, it's in online play. Only certain titles have it, and not all of them are the most popular choices. There weren't many lobbies to join when I tried, and while it was fun to play through the entire arcade game with three other players again, it was consistently riddled with slowdown. That didn't make it unplayable, but it was still noticeably imperfect. Meanwhile, an attempt at Turtles in Time online ended up crashing the entire thing back to the Switch menu.

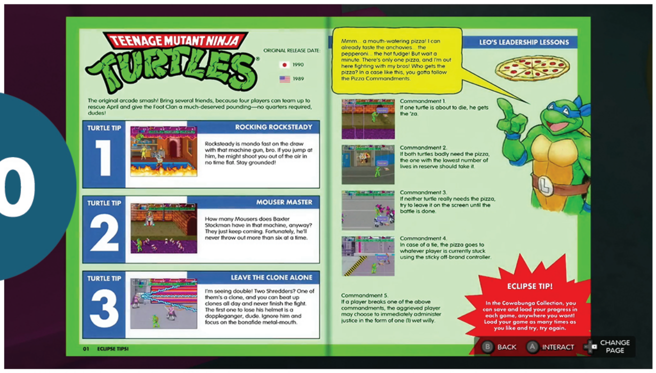
Still, getting all these titles with minimal compromise? That's awesome! Righteous! Bossa nova!

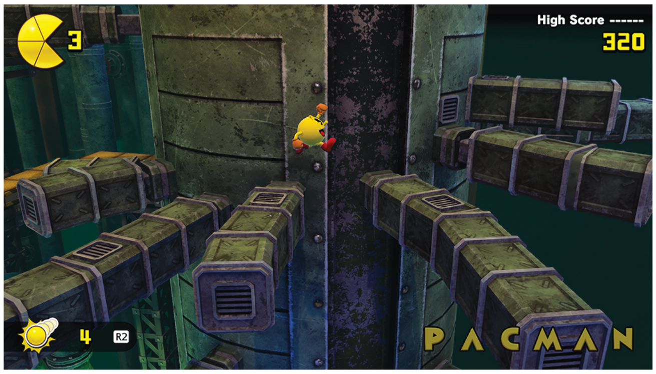
. . . Chevy Nova?

Or simply: Cowabunga! **— DAVID**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPERS: KONAMI & DIGITAL ECLIPSE RATING: T

9.0





Another Throwback for Pac

PAC-MAN WORLD RE-PAC

PAC-MAN DOES A whole lot of living in the past. Most of his releases are retreads, playing the old hits like the arcade original again and again. But there's comfort in that – Pac-Man games are a reliable way for older fans to reconnect with the magic of yesteryear.

Pac-Man World Re-Pac is the latest example of this trend in action: It will instantly transport you back in time to 1999, as it's a remake of Pac's first 3D platformer from the first PlayStation.

. . . But it may be a little too faithful of a remake. Because along with the nostalgia for the past it presents, it also revives a lot of the problems the platformer genre has since had over two decades to grow beyond.

The story finds Pac-Man happily arriving at his birthday party . . . only to find it's been destroyed, and all the guests have been kidnapped! His old adversaries Inky, Pinky, Blinky and Clyde have stolen them all away.

Six friends and family members are missing, having been spirited away by the ghouls to Ghost Island. Pac-Man must explore the island one stage at a time, hopping and bopping his way past enemies and obstacles in order to ultimately find and rescue all six of his Pac pals.

Now, I said this is a 3D platformer, but that's only halfway true. This isn't a go-anywhere adventure with player-directed camera control like Super Mario 64 was a few years before its 1999 debut. Rather, it's mostly side-scrolling with a bit of depth on the Z axis. You'll progress from left to right most of the time, and occasionally you'll find yourself in larger spaces with a bit more room to run a little more "toward" and "away" from the screen.

Actually, though, let me clarify a bit further: Pac-Man explores from the left to the right, but then back to the left, and then back to the right. This game is absolutely in love with back-tracking. It's constant. It's used over and over and over again.

It plays out like this: You'll just be walking along when you'll come across a door with a fruit icon above it. If you approach the door, it won't open – because you don't have the right fruit yet. The fruits serve as keys, and you won't find the right fruit until you go further to the right, deeper into the stage. Then you'll inevitably find the correct fruit a short distance away, and you'll have to retrace your steps back to the left to revisit the now-open door and collect whatever bonus is inside. Finally, you'll have to again go to the right, making your third trip across that same stretch of the stage.

This exact sequence happens just *so many times*. Seriously, whoever first laid out the levels had this one design concept in mind, and they just went back to that well a dozen times for every level and drank *deep*.

What surprises me is that this obviously overused idea doesn't seem to have been adjusted for this remake! I understand wanting a remake to be faithful to the source material, but this is an example of a time when a bit of editing could have improved the fun factor of the experience quite a lot.

If you're like me, you'll ultimately start ignoring most of the doors and fruit to expedite the action. Especially since grabbing all the collectables only fuels another letdown later: the horrid slot machine that follows each stage. It's impossible to win. It's a pure waste of time to even try. So why include it at all? At least make it skippable!

OK. Frustrations aired, I will say that at its core, Pac-Man World Re-Pac is still a solid platformer. You have to get yourself into a 1999 frame of mind in order to appreciate its action, but once you do, you can genuinely enjoy the quest to rescue Pac-Man's guests.

What's more, the game seems to be appealing to kids! At least as a watch-along experience. My sons have had a lot of fun getting to know Pac-Man for the first time as they've sat to watch me play. Maybe you don't have to have lived through Pac-Man's past to be able to enjoy his present! **– LUCAS**

7.5

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: NOW PRODUCTION
RATING: E

Travel Across the Land of Crossbell

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS FROM ZERO

TRAILS FROM ZERO protagonist Lloyd Bannings' favorite catchphrase is "overcoming barriers." If you decide to play this Nihon Falcom JRPG, you'll no doubt hear it several times throughout the game. It's cheesy and awesome at the same time, but more importantly, it emcompasses Trails from Zero's major themes and its path to release in the West.

Nihon Falcom's Trails series features several games, all of which are interconnected via story, setting and characters. Because of this, they have some of the best worldbuilding you'll encounter in an RPG series – but the consequence is that each game matters in the overall story. If you miss a game, you miss a crucial piece of the puzzle!

For nearly a decade, Trails from Zero and its sequel Trails to Azure were that missing piece. Until now! Thanks to a partnership between NIS America and a group of passionate fans known as The Geofront, who created high-quality fan translation patches of the games, we have Trails from Zero at our fingertips. (Trails to Azure is set to release next year.)

So, after overcoming this barrier of an official Western release, does Trails from Zero hold up? I can say with confidence that it does, whether you're completely new to the Trails series or a Trails veteran.

Trails from Zero provides the beginning of a new arc within the larger Trails series, and this makes it a suitable starting point for new players, especially for those who play exclusively on Switch. If you have access to other platforms, you can still start here, or begin with Trails in the Sky, or Trails of Cold Steel. Trails in the Sky and its two sequels occur first in the series, and Trails of Cold Steel is the first game in the series to feature 3D graphics. You should go with what works best for you!

Trails from Zero takes place in Crossbell, a small buffer state situated between two great powers: the Empire of Erebonia (featured in the Cold Steel games) and the Republic of Calvard. Because of its location, Crossbell is often caught in the middle as Erebonia and Calvard seek control of it. They both even have their own factions within Crossbell's government!

On the outside, Crossbell presents a shiny picture of prosperity and industrial achievement. Below the surface, however, corruption runs rampant, even affecting the government entities who are supposed to protect its citizens. In an attempt to gain back some of the public's goodwill, the Crossbell Police Department forms the Special Support Section, and this is where rookie detective Lloyd Bannings and his three new allies come in. They are assigned to the SSS and tasked with handling specific requests from Crossbell citizens.

No job is too menial for this group, and they have an uphill road to climb in gaining the trust of Crossbell's population. At the same time, their work allows them to uncover some sinister happenings in the city, ultimately leading them on a journey involving an assassination plot, drug smuggling, kidnapping and illegal experimentation.

Trails from Zero follows suit with other games in the series in terms of story. It's a winding and dramatic tale full of juicy twists and turns – but it requires patience at the beginning. There's a lot of setup involved, and it takes time to get going. But I promise you it's worth seeing through to the end!

The SSS themselves are also a huge highlight in the game. In addition to Lloyd, the group is composed of Elie MacDowell, the granddaughter of Crossbell's mayor; Randy Orlando, a fun-loving former member of the Crossbell Guardian Force; and Tio Plato, a young prodigy from the tech-focused Epstein Foundation.

Not only are they all well-written characters in general, but their voice actors do a phenomenal job bringing them to life. (The game features English subtitles and Japanese voice-over). Randy's VA, Shinichiro Miki, is the standout. His dialogue and performance had me in stitches regularly!

SWITCH PUBLISHER: NIS AMERICA
DEVELOPERS: NIHON FALCOM & THE GEOFRONT RATING: T

A main cast of four is small compared to many other JRPGs, but in this case, I think it benefits Trails from Zero, as each member of the SSS feels integral to the story. As the player, you get to learn about Crossbell through their eyes, watch them grow together as a team and see how they change their city for the better. I loved watching it all unfold.

Another main feature of Trails from Zero is its turn-based combat. It employs the series' Action Time (AT) Battle system, where you fight on a grid-based battlefield and manipulate the turn order in combat to your advantage in a few different ways.

If you're able to surprise and stun an enemy in the field, you'll start with a turn order that gives you an advantage at the beginning of a fight: All party members go before enemies. You may even get to fire off one of Trails from Zero's new combat offerings: Team Rush, where the four party members all unleash attacks at the same time.

During combat, different bonuses will pop up on the AT Bar, which shows the current turn order on the left side of the screen. Using the AT Bar, you can choose abilities that will place your character where the bonuses appear, allowing them to gain hit points, land critical hits, etc. It's satisfying to steal bonuses away from enemies while giving advantages to your party.

The system also features special abilities called Crafts, which are unique to each character, and Arts, which can be equipped to characters via elemental quartz. The quartz also grants stat bonuses and lets you create specific builds for combat. Personally, I equipped Randy and Lloyd with quartz to help them deal major damage, and Elie and Tio served as mainly ranged Arts casters.

The AT Battle system offers a nice amount of flexibility as you fight numerous foes in Crossbell. While the normal enemy mobs are easy to rush through, the numerous boss fights require different strategies and provide a good challenge as you go.

Navigating Crossbell and its surrounding areas is for the most part a smooth experience. You can fast-travel between the city's different areas and use a bus (with a short loading screen animation) to get to locales outside the city. Trails from Zero also has a turbo mode, and it's essential. Moving around without it is a chore, so I'm thankful it's available and works well.

The only drawback is a lack of dungeon maps, and it's made worse by their many convoluted corridors. Some may not mind it as a design choice, but Trails from Zero's runtime is meaty enough without having to waste time backtracking through dungeons. It killed the momentum for me during some of the quests, especially when you're ready to see how the story unfolds.

No matter how many times you have to run through Crossbell and its locales, however, it always looks stunning. That's thanks to NIS America bringing on PH3 Games to handle Trails from Zero's Switch port. PH3 Games has previously worked on the PC ports for the Trails of Cold Steel games, and they do quality work. They handled the PC port for Trails from Zero, and I'm glad their services were extended to the Switch port, too.

I've had problems with NIS America's Switch ports of Trails games in the past. The ports of Trails of Cold Steel III and IV had issues including blurry characters and environments, and lagging animations in combat. Trails from Zero's port provides a big step in the right direction. The game looks gorgeous on Switch both in TV and Handheld Modes. Character sprites and environments are crisp. Crossbell's varied districts shine with great detail. Water elements and lighting effects look especially pretty, and I experienced no major performance issues in or out of combat.

One recurring issue I did find involved random dialogue appearing in Japanese rather than English. I noticed it during conversations with minor characters and not during the main plot, so it didn't affect my experience greatly.

Even though it's released and in the hands of players now, I still have a hard time believing that Trails from Zero has been officially localized for the West. It's something that I never thought would happen, due to its age and the fact that Nihon Falcom keeps pumping out Trails games. But now that it's here, I don't think there's a better time to get into the series!

If you're a fan of JRPGs, enjoy deep interconnected stories and interesting characters, give Trails from Zero a try. There are no more barriers in your way! — **MAGGIE**

9.0

Mizuki's On the Case

AI: THE SOMNIUM FILES - NIRVANA INITIATIVE

AFTER ACHIEVING GLOBAL recognition with the Zero Escape series, visual novel maestro Kotaro Uchikoshi went in a tonally different direction for his 2019 follow-up, AI: The Somnium Files – a comparatively lighthearted tale with a greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

Character engagement is once again paramount in this sequel, in which a serial killer who bisects his victims at the molecular level begins terrorizing Tokyo mere months after the first game. This puzzling case initially goes unsolved, only to reopen six years later when the murders begin anew. The passage of time not only adds a wrinkle to the central mystery, it also allows us to explore the long-term effects these events have on the extended cast. (Thankfully, spoilers for the first game are shared on an opt-in basis, so players are welcome to tackle the titles in any order they wish. Clearing the original first is nonetheless recommended, as interactions with returning characters assume a familiarity that newcomers will lack.)

Several fresh faces join the likes of bubbly Internet idol Iris, Yakuza boss Moma and unabashed pervert Date. There's Komeji, the down-on-his-luck comedian with an oddly cube-shaped head who'll do anything for the sake of his son. Then we've got the hulking Gen, a restaurateur in a creepy slasher villain mask who's actually quite the affable fellow. These characters and others are brought to life by a lineup of talented voice actors and actresses whose incredible performances are as much a highlight in nirvanA Initiative as they were in the previous game.

Driving the narrative are two investigative duos. Mizuki, the breakout star of the last adventure, brings her charming snark and uncanny super strength to her new role within the police's Advanced Brain Investigation Squad. Supporting her is another returning favorite, the artificial intelligence Aiba, who resides in Mizuki's left eye socket. Together, they comb the city for clues while playing off each other like bickering sisters.

The other pair is Ryuki, a promising ABIS recruit dealing with past trauma and prone to shouting lines from My Hero Academia, and his AI-Ball partner Tama, a comedy enthusiast who enjoys tormenting Ryuki with an endless stream of sexual innuendos. Their chemistry is possibly even more entertaining, reading like an adventurous married couple.

Gameplay remains unchanged – visit various locations, select dialogue prompts to advance the story then dive into the dreams of suspects and witnesses to uncover secrets they are unwilling or unable to share. These "Somnium" sequences, criticized for being too obtuse in the last adventure, have been streamlined here significantly, offering on-the-fly difficulty toggles, more logical solutions and a wider variety of activities – one Somnium is a spoof of Pokémon GO, while another tosses you into an outlandish cooking competition straight out of Food Wars!

The past vs. present timeline navigation doesn't always work as effectively as it should. The big twist near the climax may be a mind-bending revelation, but it hinges upon certain individuals' immersion-breaking ignorance and others' pointless withholding of information. Most disappointing is how Ryuki's role is significantly diminished at around the halfway mark, leading to an unsatisfying resolution of his character arc. His struggles with mental illness could've led to insightful social commentary, but that opportunity is never capitalized upon.

Even with those narrative failings, I consider my time with nirvanA Initiative well spent. Whether or not it surpasses the original is entirely down to personal preference, but either way it's a must-play for both veteran and budding visual novel aficionados. **– TONY**

8.0

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: SPIKE CHUNSOFT RATING: M

This One's Made Just for JoJo Fans

JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE: ALL-STAR BATTLE R

ALL-STAR BATTLE R isn't just one of a meager few games based on JoJo's Bizarre Adventure to receive Western localizations, it's also the first to arrive outside of Japan on a Nintendo platform. Hardly the stellar track record befitting artist Hirohiko Araki's landmark franchise that upended the battle manga genre after it launched in 1987. Heck, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that most folks' first exposure to JoJo was through any of its innumerable Internet memes rather than official media!

As a recent inductee into the Church of JoJo myself, I feel honor-bound to share its merits with the next wave of potential fans. A moment of your time, if you please!

JoJo's Bizarre Adventure revolves around members of the Joestar bloodline and the supernatural threats they're fated to endure. The series at present is divided across eight parts, each featuring a fresh cast and starring a different Joestar descendant. Outside of a few narrative threads that link certain parts, these are standalone stories that explore different themes and character dynamics – a trek across Egypt to thwart a vengeful vampire gives way to the daily tribulations of a sleepy Japanese town, followed by an insurrection within an Italian crime syndicate. This constant reinvention is the reason JoJo has avoided growing stale, as long-running serials tend to do.

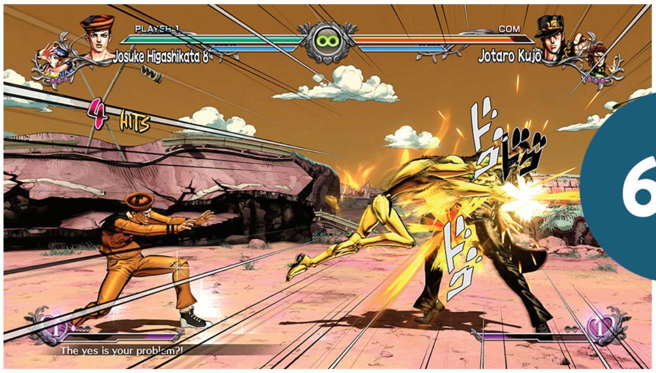
CyberConnect2, lauded for its Naruto: Ultimate Ninja series, applied that same love and attention toward capturing the essence of JoJo. All the trademark stylistic flourishes – generous use of visual onomatopoeia, haute couture fashion, dynamic poses pulled straight from Vogue magazine – are expressed in exquisite detail, paired with bright colors and bold lines for that perfect manga aesthetic. And when you aren't duking it out as any of the 51 available warriors, you're navigating menus also awash in JoJo trappings, from side commentary delivered by non-playable cameos to text prompts that reference memorable lines from the series.

Of course, JoJo is nothing without the awesome powers! Part 1 introduced Hamon, a breathing technique that channels sunlight to perform superhuman feats, while Part 7 featured Spin, which does much the same except via rotational energy. Neither hold a candle to Stands, manifestations of a user's spirit imbued with a unique ability that can be applied in endlessly creative ways. These abilities range from straightforward, such as being able to generate balls of flames, to ludicrously convoluted, like erasing blocks of time to trigger an effect without a cause. And for added cool points, Stands are often named after famous Western musicians and songs, like Kiss and "Killer Queen"! (Although fear of litigation from the original artists led to several names undergoing "legally distinct" makeovers during localization.)

Now, if you're wondering why I've avoided talking about actual gameplay thus far, it's because without a deep understanding and appreciation of the source material, All-Star Battle R is a slightly above-average fighter. This version is actually a remaster, as the original All-Star Battle came out on PS3 nearly a decade ago. But despite some minor tweaks, combat is still rough around the edges. Balancing is all over the place – characters with long-distance attacks have a significantly unfair advantage, while only Hamon users are able to charge their special meter at will. The main single-player mode is just a collection of canon and what-if matchups lacking a proper framing device, while the online mode employs publisher Bandai Namco's infamous delay-based netcode that Smash Ultimate players know far too well.

This is an experience tailored solely for rabid JoJo fans and no one else. On the bright side, it makes for a perfect excuse to finally hop aboard the JoJo train! Only after emerging from that rabbit hole can you enjoy All-Star Battle R for what it is. **– TONY**

SWITCH PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO
DEVELOPER: CYBERCONNECT2
RATING: T



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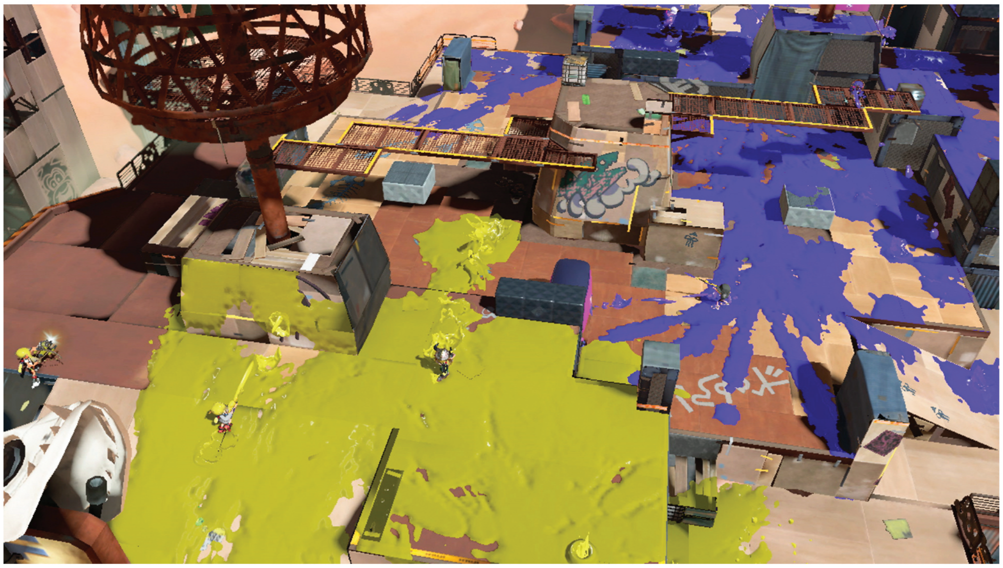


A Third Splash of Ink

SPLATOON 3

SWITCH PUBLISHER/DEVELOPER: NINTENDO RATING: E10+

I JUST KEEP going back to the well. (The inkwell, I suppose?)

Splatoon 3 went live in September, and ever since it launched I've had to will myself to stay away from it. I'm a grown man with a family! I've got a lot of responsibilities! So why do I keep feeling compelled to stay up into the wee hours of the morning shooting virtual ink at strangers?

There's just something so addictive about the core game design here that keeps drawing me back in again and again. The Splatoon series has had a magical "just one more round!" appeal ever since it originated on the Wii U, and now Splatoon 3 has refined that magic into pure mystical magnetism.

"Refinement" is the key word here, since Splatoon 3 builds on the foundations laid down by the series' first two installments without drastically overhauling anything or introducing many all-new elements. There are a few – we'll get to those, like the great new Tableturf card battles – but for the most part, this sequel is more iterative than transformative.

And I'm fine with that! Personally, I'm incredibly pleased that Nintendo seems to have recognized what a winning formula they've had with this series from the start, and they've broken from their traditional rule of not doing a sequel unless it can totally stand apart from its predecessors. (You know, that unwritten rule that's kept them from making a new F-Zero game for 20 years.)

There's a lot to cover in Splatoon 3, so let's evaluate the game one chunk at a time.

MOSTLY TERRIFIC TURF WARS

First up, let's talk turfy.

Turf Wars are still the heart of the Splatoon experience: It's you and three teammates going up against an opposing squad of four, and both sides have just three minutes to lay down more of their color of ink in an arena than their opponents. It's a battle of balance! Victory is determined by the amount of ink splashed on the ground when time runs out, so you'd think at first that it's most important to focus your attention on claiming as much territory as possible. But the enemy team is both inking and attacking you at the same time, so should you aim your ink shooter's sights at them to try to splat them instead? Dealing enough damage to any enemy causes them to explode in a burst of your color of ink, and it also forces them to respawn back at their base (after a penalty of a few seconds has elapsed). That bit of extra time with one less enemy on the field might be just what your team needs to gain the upper hand in the overall battle, so it's worth considering going on the offensive!

. . . But then, if your assault fails and you're the one who ends up sent back to base after an embarrassing splat, well, you've handicapped your own squad. Like I said, it's always a battle of balance!

Splatoon 3 has nearly perfected this dynamic, as the tension between inking, attacking and defending feels more consistently fun than before. The arena designs have been refined to an exacting degree, creating great bottlenecks between your base and your opponents' that make for intense firefights. (Or inkfights.) Learning the ins and outs of each map is key, and a new Recon mode lets you enter each arena alone for as much practice time as you'd like. You can pinpoint precise spots for ambushes, then unleash your strategy in real multiplayer matches!

. . . If every player's Internet connection holds up for the full three minutes, that is. Maybe it's just since the game is still so new, but Splatoon 3 seems to be dealing with a lot more disconnects than prior titles. An early drop-out from any player means the match is cancelled for all participants, and that's frustrating. Nothing's worse than feeling like you're on the way to victory, then suddenly getting hit with the "Sorry, game over" message.

EXTRA SPICY SALMON RUNS

If you tire of Turf Wars – or would rather just cooperate with other players instead of competing against them – you can jump into the four-player PvE mode Salmon Run, making a return from Splatoon 2. It's a totally different way to play, as your squad of squids faces off against wave after wave of computer-controlled enemies emerging relentlessly from a polluted ocean. Your goal is to push back the swarm of Salmonids and survive – but you also have to harvest Golden Eggs that drop from defeated foes and carry them back to an Egg Basket that pops up on the map.

Salmon Run can be insane. You'll get eased into it at the start, as the quantity of enemies you'll face and the number of Golden Eggs you and your team are required to collect are both low when you're a beginner – but as you rank up, the difficulty ramps up. At higher levels, this mode is a chaotic cacophony! Over 100 enemies can be in play simultaneously, and not just slow-moving Chum, but powerful Boss Salmonids that can crush you, zap you with lasers or missiles all the way from the other side of the map or straight up eat you alive when they emerge from underneath the ink.

I enjoy the energy and intensity of Salmon Run, but I feel that it's a little too tough right now. Splatoon 3's big new addition to the mode is an "Xtra Wave" that will sometimes trigger at the end of a successful run, in which a massive beast fish named Cohozuna will appear. I've faced off against this foe over a dozen times so far, and I've only been a part of one squad that's actually managed to defeat it. I think it probably needs to be nerfed.

Salmon Run also rotates weapons every day and a half or so, and the weapon selection almost always stinks – it's hard to win when you're armed with the wimpiest, weirdest guns (and umbrellas?) the game has to offer.

EXPLORING ALTERNA

The Turf Wars (and related Ranked modes like Rainmaker, Tower Control and Clam Blitz) are all eight-player games, and Salmon Run is always a four-player affair. But if you'd like some alone time, Splatoon 3 still has something for you: an expansive solo story mode!

It's an experience in two parts. First you've got a hub world to explore: a secret subterranean facility called Alterna, hidden underneath the Splatlands' desert. It's a set of snow-covered islands infested by "Fuzzy Ooze," a substance that instantly kills your hero if you so much as graze it. Fortunately, you've got a Smallfry buddy who's hungry for the stuff! You power up his appetite with Power Eggs and launch him at bulbous growths in the fuzz, and he gobbles them up, which removes that section of ooze from the map. Slowly you clear a safe pathway through each part of this overworld and can move forward...

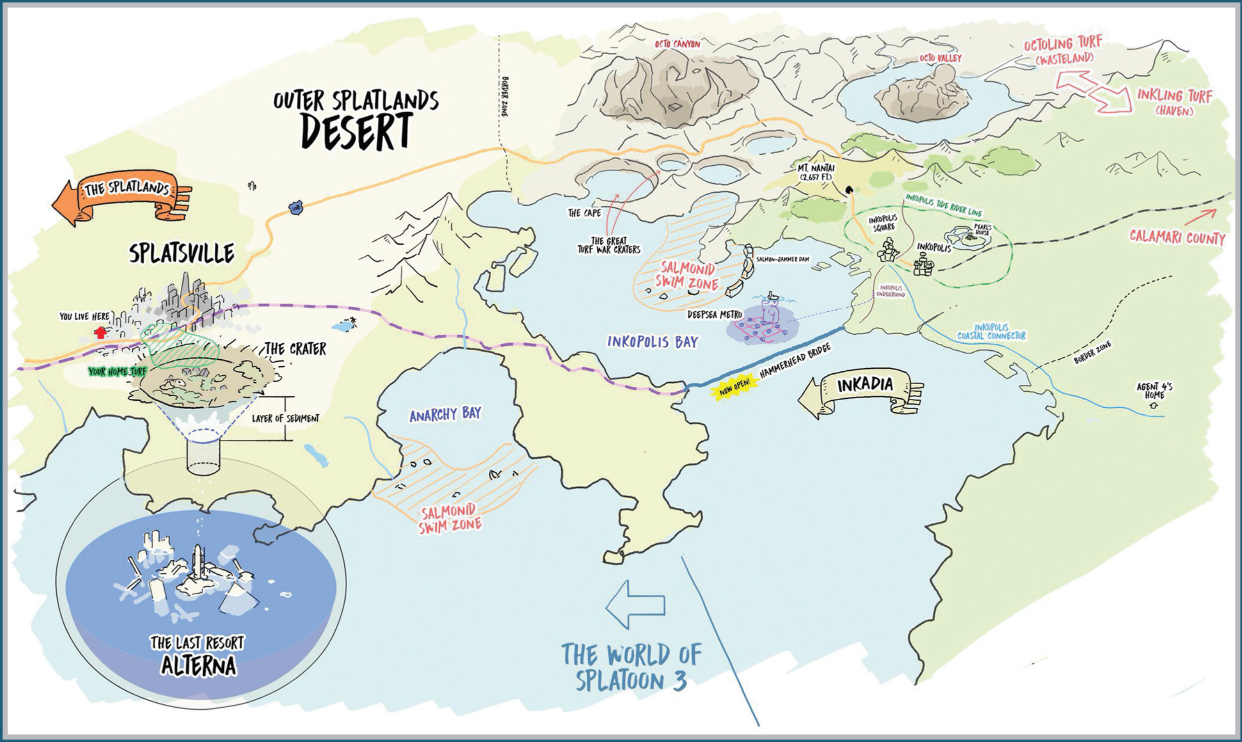
... To the entrances to the action stages! That's the second part of the single-player: standalone challenge levels that each have some kind of task for you to accomplish. Sometimes it's just taking out enemies to reach the goal safely. Other times you've got to ride a set of rails and blast targets along the way. Still others have you navigating through mazes, or dodging deadly seismic waves, or seeing if you can survive a gauntlet of foes with a limited ink supply!

If you overcome all these obstacles, you'll be rewarded with some quantity of Power Eggs. You then bring those back to the overworld, use them to fuel up Smallfry so he can clear away more of the Fuzzy Ooze, and rinse and repeat the process until you make it to the final challenge.

Some wonderful boss battles take place along the way, and the plot has some fun twists and turns, particularly for players returning from the prior Splatoon solo campaigns. But while I enjoyed the structure of the Alterna overworld, I was left a little disappointed when it was all said and done.

The challenge levels just feel like more of the same – they're just the same kind of trippy obstacle courses that are built out of weirdly floating platforms hovering in some unknown space in the air, just as they were in Splatoon 1, Splatoon 2 and the Octo Expansion. And all of the enemies are the same as before! It's the very same set of Octarians, given a slight visual tweak to be fuzzy instead of slimy. When Nintendo named and promoted this single-player campaign as "Return of the Mammalians" I got my hopes up that the Mammalians would be some entirely new enemy force our Inklings would have to overcome! But no. That name just didn't end up meaning much of anything at all in the end.

Nintendo has promised another campaign is in the works, like the Octo Expansion, so *maybe* it'll be a little different? I doubt it, though.



THE WIDENING WORLD OF THE SPLATOON SERIES

This map doesn't appear within Splatoon 3, but the series' developers were kind enough to share it to offer added insight into the Inklings' (and Octolings') world! You can see Inkopolis, the hub world of the first two games, in Inkadia in the east, along with the site of the single-player campaigns from those games, including Octo Valley, Octo Canyon and even the Deepsea Metro. The Salmonid Swim Zones are where Salmon Runs take place. Then taking your eyes over to the left, you can see "The World of Splatoon 3." Most of this new game focuses on areas further west than we've ever explored before, including Splatsville, the desert that surrounds that city, The Crater (where the new story mode kicks off) and Alterna, deep below the surface (where the story mode mostly takes place). We sadly don't get a lot of Splatlands exploration in Splatoon 3, but with this level of worldbuilding in mind, the developers should take us even further in the future!

SHUFFLE AND DEAL

While the too-frequent connectivity problems of Turf War, the too-difficult challenge of Salmon Run and the too-samey level designs of the story mode are all marks against Splatoon 3's greatness, I do want to emphasize that none of those are major drawbacks to the fun factor overall. And having all of those modes in one package makes this game an incredible value! Even better? There's a fourth game mode that you can also pour hours into!

Tableturf Battle is a new collectible card game you can play in Splatsville, the overall hub world. It's a one-on-one contest to claim more territory on a grid of squares than your opponent. (Like Turf War, but if its essence was distilled down into a card game.)

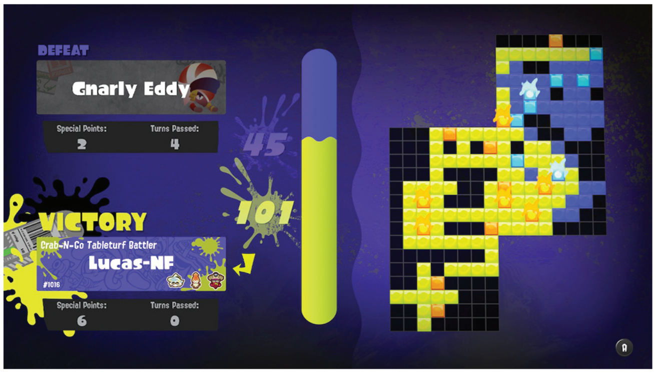
It's addictively fun. You play cards that each lay down some pattern of ink on the grid, and you have to try to cut off your opponent from having unrestricted access to as much space as you can, as quickly as you can, so that you're the one who has the most opportunities to freely play more cards and claim more squares. You can go a long way using only the Starter Deck that's provided for you by default, but you'll also earn new card packs by hitting milestones in other game modes or finding them hidden in story mode — you can then fully customize your own personal deck.

Tableturf matches take only a few minutes to play and involve a lot more strategy than you'd think! This mode is a great new addition to the Splatoon world, and I encourage every player to seek it out and give it a try!

JUST THE BEGINNING

I'll wrap up this review now and I'll assign a score, but it's important to note before we close that this is only the beginning for Splatoon 3. The game will get new content for years to come! There will be special Splatfest events to look forward to regularly. And the developers will patch a lot of the problems in place here at launch, so hopefully a few months from now things like player disconnects won't be quite so prevalent. You're welcome to wait until some of those upgrades have come through to dive in, but I say dive in now! Go ahead and make a splash as soon as possible. Just try not to get too addicted or stay up too late! You've got responsibilities! **— LUCAS**

9.0



ARCHIVE

The complete list of Nintendo Force retail reviews from the last two years. Scores reflect individual reviewers' opinions.

SWITCH

TITLE	SCORE	REVIEWER	ISSUE
Alex Kidd in Miracle World DX	7.5	David	#54
Ary and the Secret of Seasons	6.0	Lucas	#49
Atelier Ryza 2: Lost Legends & the Secret Fairy	8.0	Maggie	#51
Atelier Sophie 2: The Alchemist of the Mysterious Dream	8.0	Maggie	#59
Bakugan: Champions of Vestroia	6.5	Lucas	#51
Balan Wonderworld	5.0	Lucas	#52
Big Brain Academy: Brain vs. Brain	8.0	Kris	#58
Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night	7.5	Tony	#48
Blue Reflection: Second Light	8.5	Maggie	#57
Bravely Default II	9.0	Nadia	#52
Bugsnax	8.5	Lucas	#61
Capcom Fighting Collection	9.0	Jonathan	#61
Catherine: Full Body	8.5	Jonathan	#49
Clubhouse Games: 51 Worldwide Classics	8.5	Lucas	#48
Cobra Kai: The Karate Kid Saga Continues	6.5	Kris	#50
Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time!	8.5	David	#52
Cris Tales	6.5	Maggie	#57
Cruis'n Blast	8.0	David	#56
DC Super Hero Girls: Teen Power	7.0	Kris	#53
Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise	7.0	Jonathan	#49
Doki Doki Literature Club Plus!	8.5	Rebecca	#55
Dragon Ball Z: Kakarot	6.0	Kris	#56
Fire Emblem Warriors: Three Hopes	8.0	Rebecca	#61
G.I. Joe: Operation Blackout	6.5	Lucas	#54
Hot Wheels Unleashed	7.5	Lucas	#56
Hyrule Warriors: Age of Calamity	8.5	Tony	#50
John Wick Hex	7.5	Chris	#51
Kingdom Hearts: Melody of Memory	7.0	Tony	#50
Kirby and the Forgotten Land	10	Lucas	#59
LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga	9.0	Thor	#59
LIVE A LIVE	8.5	Rebecca	#61
Mario Golf: Super Rush	9.0	Lucas	#54
Mario Kart Live: Home Circuit	9.5	Lucas	#49
Mario Party Superstars	8.5	Lucas	#57
Mario Strikers: Battle League	7.5	Lucas	#60
Metroid Dread	9.0	Tony	#56
Miitopia	7.5	Brett	#53
MLB The Show 22	8.5	Dan	#59
Monster Hunter Rise	9.0	Lucas	#52
Monster Hunter Stories 2: Wings of Ruin	9.0	Maggie	#54
NEO: The World Ends with You	8.0	Rebecca	#55
NERF Legends	4.0	Lucas	#57
New Pokémon Snap	9.0	Lucas	#53
Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom – Prince's Edition	8.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl	7.5	Brett	#56
Nickelodeon Kart Racers 2: Grand Prix	7.0	David	#50
No More Heroes III	9.5	Jonathan	#55
Pac-Man Museum+	8.5	Kris	#60
Paper Mario: The Origami King	8.5	Brett	#48
Paw Patrol Mighty Pups: Save Adventure Bay!	8.5	Lucas	#51
Persona 5 Strikers	9.0	Maggie	#52
Pikmin 3 Deluxe	9.5	Lucas	#50
Pokémon Brilliant Diamond	6.5	Rebecca	#57
Pokémon Legends: Arceus	9.0	Lucas	#58
Pokémon Shining Pearl	6.0	Lucas	#57
Puyo Puyo Tetris 2	8.5	Rebecca	#50
R-Type Final 2	7.5	Jonathan	#53
Record of Lodoss War: Deedlit in Wonder Labyrinth	8.0	Jonathan	#60
Rune Factory 5	7.5	Maggie	#59
Sakuna: Of Rice and Ruin	8.5	Lucas	#50
Shadowverse: Champion's Battle	8.0	Maggie	#55
Shin Megami Tensei V	8.0	Meghan	#57
Sonic Colors: Ultimate	5.0	Kris	#58
Story of Seasons: Friends of Mineral Town	7.5	Rebecca	#48
Story of Seasons: Pioneers of Olive Town	6.5	Rebecca	#53
Super Mario 3D All-Stars	7.0	Lucas	#49
Super Mario 3D World + Bowser's Fury	10	Lucas	#51
Super Monkey Ball: Banana Mania	8.5	David	#56
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge	10	Lucas	#60
The Caligula Effect 2	8.0	Maggie	#58
The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles	9.0	Rebecca	#54
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel III	9.0	Maggie	#49
The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel IV	9.0	Maggie	#52
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword HD	9.0	Lucas	#54
Transformers: Battlegrounds	7.5	Lucas	#54
Triangle Strategy	9.0	Nadia	#59
WarioWare: Get It Together!	7.5	Rebecca	#56
World's End Club	6.5	Kris	#55
Xenoblade Chronicles: Definitive Edition	10	Lucas	#48
Ys IX: Monstrum Nox	9.0	Lucas	#55

SECOND OPINION
POKÉMON LEGENDS: ARCEUS

HOW ABOUT A second opinion on Legends: Arceus? This was the first open-world Pokémon adventure, and the second one is approaching soon, so why not?

The first twist here is that you no longer have to start a battle to catch Pokémon! Just hide in tall grass so they won't see you, then toss a ball right at them. But be careful, because some monsters get mad and chase you and try to make you faint. (One Octillery even uses a Hyper Beam!) I do have a small complaint about the Balls: They always roll once. In older games they'll roll one, two or three times, and each roll means you're closer to catching a 'mon. With these you never know. They do have fun fireworks, though!

While you're adventuring you might see Pokémon with glowing red eyes. They're bigger, stronger and meaner than others of their kind. And if they see you, they'll get really mad! They're the Alpha Pokémon (I thought Arceus was?), and they're tougher than your team, so you can't beat or catch, say, a Level 40 Alpha Rapidash with your team of Level 9 Bidoofs. But when your team is stronger, you can come back and beat it, or you can try to catch it! I wonder how speedrunners are taking advantage of the Alphas? (I once caught a Level 70 Alpha Machamp with a Great Ball! Sometimes you just get lucky!)

Pokémon Legends: Arceus let us catch Pokémon without battles, defeat and catch the amazing Alphas and explore an all-new open world, so I hope we'll see all the same in Scarlet & Violet! And if not, maybe we'll get a Legends sequel in the future? **— CARTER**

9.0 LUCAS

9.5 CARTER

COMMUNITY

ART & PUBLISHING

Hand-Drawn Gaming Lives!

Get in on the ground floor with the new bi-monthly newsletter!

A LITTLE OVER a year ago, a promising project was nearing the end of its crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter. Called "Hand-Drawn Game Guides," it was a set of books that were each packed with illustrations of some classic old-school NES games, including Metroid, The Legend of Zelda, Ninja Gaiden and Contra. And the artwork wasn't just nostalgic, but functional! The books genuinely were guides, created to help newcomers and returning veterans alike find their way past the obstacles of each adventure.

Sadly, that Kickstarter was cancelled before it reached its final day. *Just* before, unfortunately, due to Nintendo's lawyers waiting until the 11th hour to raise an objection against the guides' use of the Metroid and Zelda trademarks. There was less than one day left to go, and the project was more than fully funded, when creator Philip Summers had to pull the plug!

So "Hand-Drawn Game Guides" got the rug pulled out from under it at the last minute. But, thankfully, that's not the end of the story!

After that Kickstarter was forced to fizzle, Philip went back to work, refining his idea of illustrating the classics into a new, less legally actionable form. Now he's launched a new Patreon page called "Hand-Drawn Gaming," and it follows the Nintendo Force Magazine model of providing new print publications to patrons on a bi-monthly basis!

The first release, seen here, appropriately takes on the original Castlevania in connection with the annual October spooky season. Beyond that striking front cover lies further tips and tricks that apply to the full extent of Simon Belmont's original quest, which remains to this day a truly difficult challenge to complete. (I don't know if I've ever made it to the end of the game without the help of save states!)

The centerpiece of the issue – which is eight pages long in total – is a two-page spread that holds an entire map of Dracula's Castle. We've reprinted roughly half of it on our next page so that you can get a sense of Philip's style! (But you'll have to support him to see the entire thing!)

One thing that strikes me when I look at this newly illustrated take on Castlevania is how every level was made with such deliberate intention. I mean, just look at how the levels line up perfectly with the overall structure of the castle! Simon enters through the front gate, fights zombies in the entrance hall, then begins to climb up further into the towers and over the bridges that connect them – and all the while, every block he sets foot on was placed there by the developers with an understanding of where it fit in the greater whole of the entire castle. I love that I can look at a brand-new map like this and gain new understanding and appreciation for a game I've played for decades. Thanks for that, Philip!

If you decide to throw your support behind Mr. Summers (a.k.a. the Hand-Drawn Gaming Guy), you can get new releases mailed to you every two months. Older issues will be made available in digital form to patrons as well, so you'll be able to go back and browse any you might have missed.

And who knows? Maybe some of the old Guides content will get to reappear some day! **– LUCAS**

Patreon.com/HandDrawnGaming

TIPS
A
Medusa heads always move in a sine wave pattern.
B
Simon can crouch to avoid the middle spike traps only. Run as the traps raise.
C
Simon can't be knocked off stairs. This can be useful during crow attacks.
D
Holy Water's flames stop the Bone Pillar's fireballs, giving Simon a chance to move in.
E
Ignore
TREASURE HUNT
1
JUMP!
2
KNEEL!
3
Break the bricks and walk in.
4
Stand still
5
Stand still at the 4th Window
6
KNEEL!
7
8

PRESS RUN BOOK REVIEW

The History of Sunsoft: Volume 1

The first installment in a series of retrospectives, helping kick off Limited Run's new book publishing imprint.

THE PRINTING PRESSES are up and running for Press Run, an all-new book publishing imprint of Limited Run Games. LRG's mostly known for making physical cartridge versions of video games that would otherwise only be available digitally, but they're expanding their empire to include physical books now too! (Books still related to video games, of course.)

The new product line kicked off at the end of September with a few reprints of past publications from author Jeremy Parish, but also in the mix was one never-before-seen tome of great gaming lore: The History of Sunsoft: Volume 1, written by Stefan Gancer.

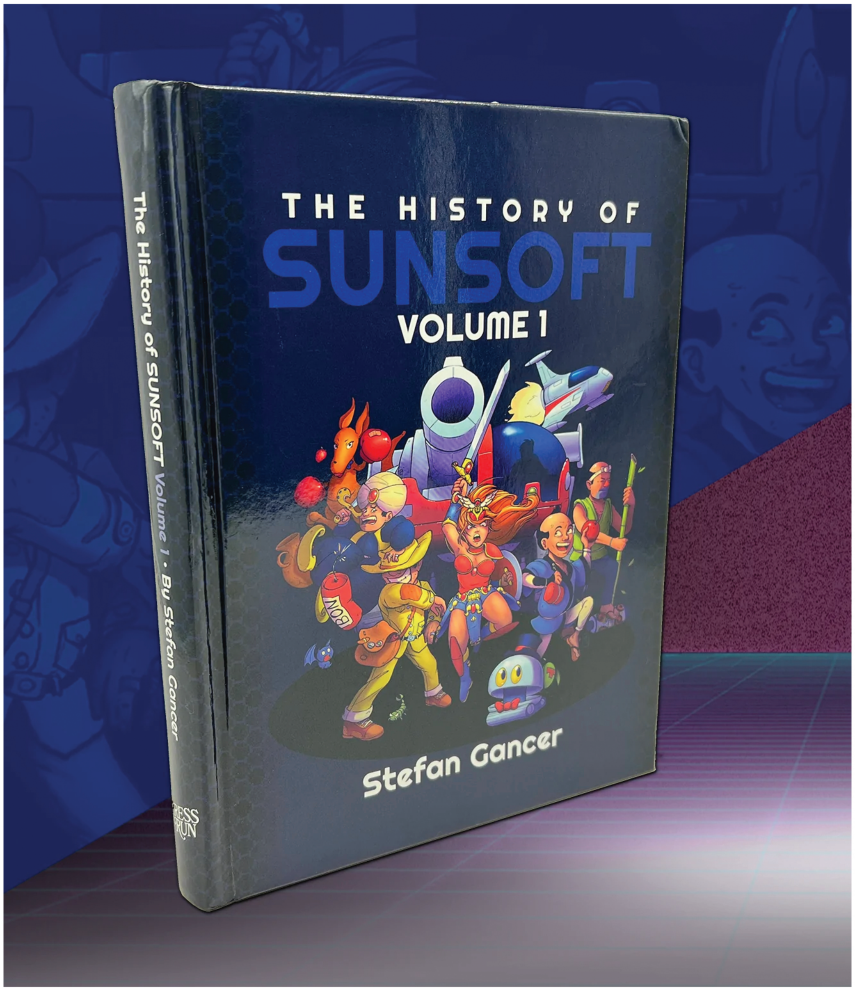
The timing couldn't be more serendipitous! As you've probably just seen back in the Download section of this same issue, Sunsoft is in the process of making a new comeback as we speak! So it's a great time to flip through this book and gain a greater understanding of how the company started.

Stefan's work here is impressively detailed and beautifully researched, as he spent years reaching out to and interviewing dozens of employees of the Sun Electronics company – work that involved a ton of translation back and forth from Japanese to English! He clearly gained the respect of the key players who made all of Sunsoft's great games a reality over the years. It shows in every page.

The drawback is that his research might have been a little too in-depth! This book being Volume 1 means it only covers Sunsoft's work up until 1989, then cuts off with the promise that the tale will be picked up in a future Volume 2. (And Volume 3!) With this first book priced at $34.99, and the two future follow-ups likely the same, you're looking at an investment of over $100 to get the full story.

Sunsoft superfans should pay that price happily, though, as there will likely never be another source of historical info about the company like this! I was drawn in by the write-ups on big titles like Blaster Master, but then enjoyed deepening my knowledge with the information on some obscure Japan-only releases like The Wing of Madoola.

Sunsoft's coming back, so read up! **– LUCAS**



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LimitedRunGames.com

GOING CONSUMER

After having spent a little more than six years developing games for arcades and chasing the popularity of **Space Invaders**, Sun decided to get in early on a new gaming trend. Nintendo's Family Computer console—Famicom for short—debuted in Japan on July 15, 1983 and slowly grew in popularity, becoming a bona-fide hit by the summer of 1984, when other companies began publishing Famicom games. Sun joined the third-party lineup in 1985. Like most companies that published for Famicom in the system's early days, Sun's engineers reverse-engineered the Famicom to learn how to make games for it.

SUNSOFT

Sun Electronics' arcade games were simply a part of the company's efforts to produce different kinds of electronic goods. Engineers designed their games rather than dedicated game developers. As they branched out into the Famicom market, Sun clearly wanted to do better. Kiharu Yoshida, who launched the company's video game business in 1978, says that he always wanted a brand name for Sun's games business. He got it with Sunsoft, which combined the "Sun" of Sun Electronics with the shortened form of "software."

Originally written as "Sun Soft," the label's name had to be shortened due to trademark issues. Ironically, trademark law would work in Sun's favor a few years later when Sun Micro Systems attempted to launch their own "SunSoft" brand. By that point, Sun Electronics owned the worldwide rights to the Sunsoft name in electronics, and it was Sun Micro System who had to terminate their SunSoft brand.

Sunsoft joined a rapidly growing slate of third-party developers for Famicom. The first of these had been Hudson, who had helped Nintendo develop the Family BASIC programming cartridge for Famicom. Nintendo themselves frequently relied on outside developers to help program their games, working closely with studios like Systems Research and Development, Intelligent Systems, and HAL Laboratory. However, once the Famicom became a hit, Nintendo themselves couldn't single-handedly produce enough new games for the console even with the aid of outside contractors. Third-party publishers helped fill the growing demand

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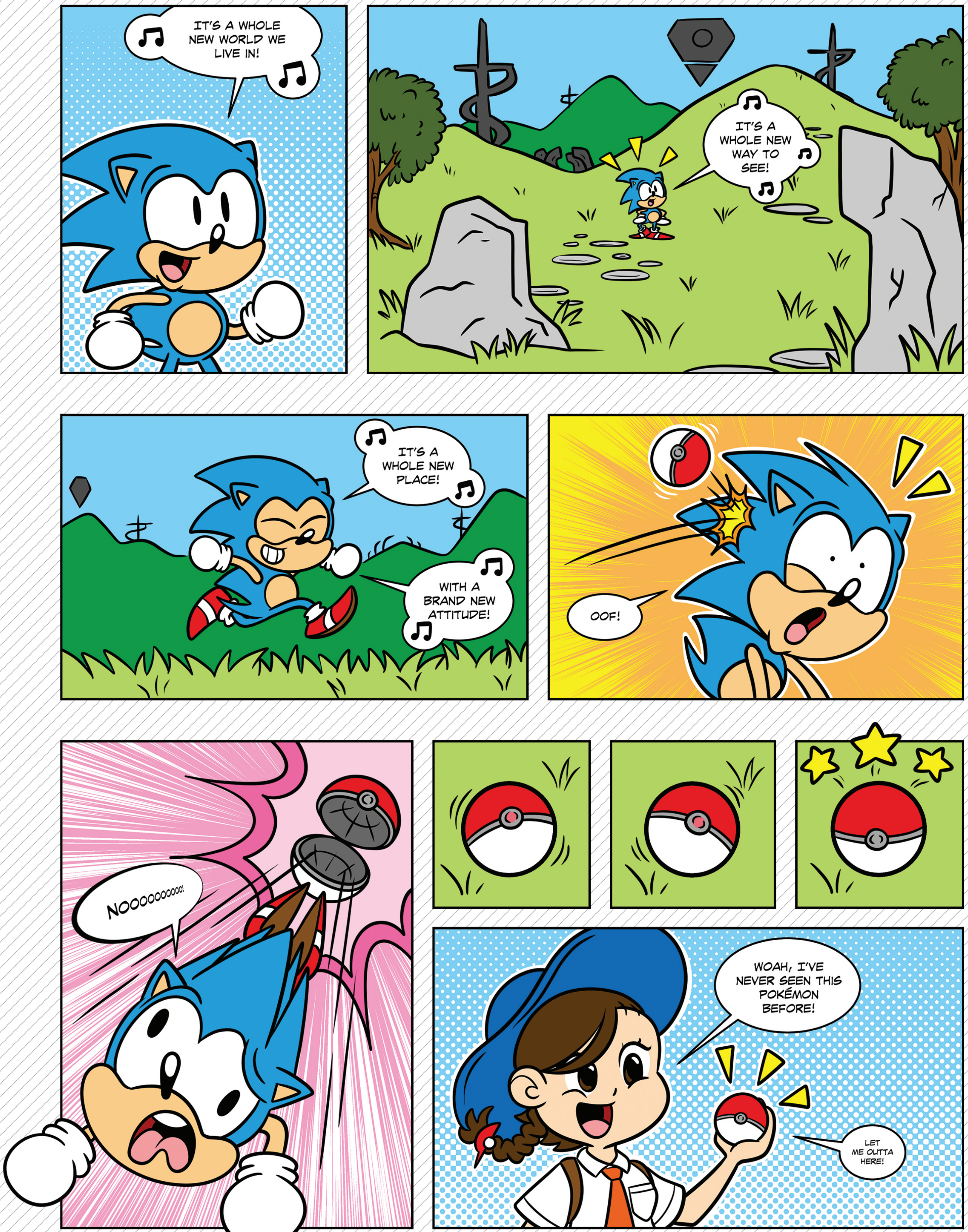

BY MATTHEW LOFFHAGEN

NEXT ISSUE

This NF issue concludes our 10th year of publishing, which means it's time to celebrate our 10th anniversary next time! And wouldn't you know it: Just like our debut issue had a brand-new Fire Emblem game on its front cover, so too has the timing worked out that the new **Fire Emblem Engage** will be launching at the perfect time to claim the cover of our 10th anniversary issue! You won't want to miss our birthday festivities, our deeper look at what's in store for FE series fans with the next sequel and our full 2023 Year in Preview. We'll see you back here next time!

IN THE WORKS FOR ISSUE #63:

- FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE
- OCTOPATH TRAVELER II
- KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE
- POKÉMON SCARLET & VIOLET
- THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM
- SONIC FRONTIERS
- PIKMIN 4
- MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS
- METROID PRIME 4
- DIGIMON SURVIVE
- NICKELODEON KART RACERS 3: SLIME SPEEDWAY
- BAYONETTA 3
- ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE

AND MUCH MORE!

JANUARY/ FEBRUARY 2023

CHANCE TIME!

I'D LIKE TO formally announce that we've hired another new employee! Developers just keep expanding the multiplayer modes in their games, and with new titles like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Shredder's Revenge supporting six players simultaneously, we felt we had to have just one more Super Thomas Brother to help shoulder the load!

NF fans, I'm pleased to introduce you to Chance Marshall Thomas! He's just a little guy right now, but he'll be growing big and strong soon enough, and I know he'll be eager to join all four of his big brothers in plenty of game times in the years to come. As you might have guessed, growing up with a Dad who makes a Nintendo magazine for a living means all of them have come to love Nintendo games from an early age. Chance is doomed to the same kind of childhood! He doesn't stand a chance! (Yes, I know he'll hear all the puns throughout his life.)

Since my last update on the brothers' gaming habits, Carter's become an official Super Mario Odyssey speedrunner, Calvin has established himself as a promising young Splatoon player, Cooper loves rolling around in Kirby's Dream Buffet and Colson holds his own in every game he tries. Including TMNT! . . . And I just realized I now have more sons than Splinter. I'd better step up my game as sensei! **— LUCAS**

NF

ISSUE #62:
WIDE OPEN SPACES

SONIC FRONTIERS

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

PIKMIN 4

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

SPLATOON 3

FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

KIRBY'S RETURN TO DREAM LAND DELUXE

SHOVEL KNIGHT DIG

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES: THE COWABUNGA COLLECTION

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS FROM ZERO

SODA DRINKER PRO

NOVEMBER/ DECEMBER 2022